

“For The Enjoyment of All:”  
Cosmopolitan Aspirations, Urban Encounters and Class Boundaries in Mexico City

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## ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the production and experience of class and racial distinctions in contemporary Mexico City by focusing on encounter and proximity between different social groups in the country’s most emblematic urban center. It draws on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork with artists and young professionals living in the city’s historic center as part of a public-private redevelopment plan locally known as the “rescue.” Led by multimillionaire Carlos Slim, this endeavor has been framed as an initiative of civil society to recover the symbolic heart of the nation from crime and illegality while transforming it into a secure and livable space for *all* Mexicans. The rescue mobilizes a neoliberal idiom of the modern (associated in Mexico and across the world with democracy and responsible citizenship, a retreating state and a free market economy) and epitomizes the illegibility of public and private distinctions.

I focus on moments of encounter between the historic center’s new affluent residents, on the one hand, and the inhabitants of its dilapidated tenements and the vendors of its informal street markets, on the other. Such encounters slide into suspicion, uncertainty, instability and misrecognition. In focusing on encounter I trace new residents’ desire for commonality, for an “all of us” in the historic center (a recognition as urban dwellers or as fellow citizens), and their anxieties about the very possibility of this commonality. Such situated fears, I argue, articulate with longstanding elite

apprehensions in Mexico about the popular masses, historically construed as the embodiment of the national subject and at the same time as the manifestation of atavistic residues. In the discourses and practices of different agents of rescue (new residents, the police, private investors and state officials) these masses figure at once as subjects to be redeemed and as plainly irredeemable others, unfit for the requirements of modern democratic citizenship. The dissertation thus traces relations between new residents' quotidian fears of crime and violence in the socially mixed spaces of the historic center on the one hand, and contemporary debates and anxieties over liberal democracy, citizenship and social belonging, on the other.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Making Contact

We have finally made contact with the teenagers from the *vecindad*<sup>1</sup> down the street,” Monica<sup>2</sup> told me excitedly as we chatted over beers and a dense cloud of cigarette smoke in a small bar located in the southwestern edges of Mexico City’s historic center, a derelict and mostly impoverished area with a reputation of being dangerous. With a relaxed and bohemian atmosphere, dim lights and walls covered with sepia-tainted bullfighting posters, plastic figurines of wrestlers, abstract paintings and a variety of other disparate objects, the bar was a favorite meeting place for young artists, students and cultural promoters who had recently moved to the historic center. It was Thursday past nine in the evening and the bar was almost full, flooded with the sounds of electronic music and loud chatter. The street outside was dark and mostly empty, save for a couple of kids playing soccer nearby or for scattered pedestrians returning home from work.

The first contact to which Monica referred, she told me, had occurred a few nights earlier as she sat drinking at the same place in the company of her old friend Pedro, a thirty two year old poet who owned the bar, and a couple of other artists who lived or worked nearby. It was past midnight when a teenager in baggy pants and a tight white t-shirt (the Hip-Hop fashion style of the kids who usually loitered on the street) came in

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<sup>1</sup> *Vecindades*, the most common form of housing in Mexico City’s historic center, are old, usually derelict, in some cases colonial buildings, with one or several courtyards that have been converted into multi-family houses and are often occupied by poor residents.

<sup>2</sup> With the exception of prominent public figures, the names of the people who appear in this dissertation, as well as of some institutions, have been changed in order to preserve their anonymity.

and walked straight to the bar, looking confused. He was under the influence of *chemo*, an industrial solvent consumed as a cheap drug, and its strong smell inundated the space around him. Monica, an outgoing and eccentric writer and academic in her early thirties who had a reputation for being somewhat reckless, invited the young man to join their table. He was nineteen, named Manuel, and lived in the most rundown of all the street's buildings. After a while of small chatter and uncomfortable silences Manuel gestured that he was leaving and Monica asked if she could join. She would love to see the interior of his building, she said. Manuel agreed. They walked the thirty meters that separated the bar from his home in absolute silence and sat together in the dark and derelict interior patio of the *vecindad*. Manuel offered Monica some of his *chemo*, which she refused nonchalantly. About fifteen minutes later, he walked her back to the bar and left.

When telling me his version of this incident, Pedro confessed that he had been rather unhappy with Monica's behavior. Going with that kid at such late hours, he felt, had been most imprudent. He and the rest had been very nervous, feeling responsible for whatever could have happened to Monica in the *vecindad*. Besides, what if Manuel kept returning? Pedro said he would not know how to handle him and did not want him in his bar under the influence of *chemo*. But Monica would have none of it. She saw this as a golden opportunity to reach out to (and into) a hostile and vulnerable group in the area.

Manuel kept returning day after day, just as Pedro had feared. He eventually asked for a job, or at least for free beers. So Pedro and Monica came up with a solution: getting him involved in one of their cultural endeavors, "Poetry and Combat." The project consisted of disseminating poetry throughout the historic center by printing famous short poems on the most quotidian objects. On one occasion they printed hundreds of them on

the paper bags of the corner bakery, so that people would encounter a poem with their daily bread. At another time they threw thousands of poems from the roof of a building at a street corner near the bar—poetry falling from the sky. From Manuel they asked that he distribute poems in his *vecindad* and obtain the signature of his neighbors for every poem that he delivered to them. He would be paid a small compensation for this. Monica was happy with the plan. She did not want to lose Manuel once contact had been made. “I want to shake the barriers a bit” (*cimbrar un poquito las barreras*), she told me, “although I know we can’t really change his life. It would be very difficult at this point.”

Monica and Pedro both worked for Culture Space, an eclectic cultural institution adjacent to the bar that, with a brew of highbrow conceptual art exhibitions and handcraft workshops, aimed to appeal to artists from throughout the city as well as to lower class residents from the vicinity. Privately funded by multimillionaire Carlos Slim, Culture Space was founded less than a year earlier in the context of a public-private initiative to revitalize and repopulate the city’s historic center. Locally known as “the rescue,” this project discursively construed the historic center as a site that, having been taken over by disorder and illegality, had to be rescued for the sake of all Mexicans. It thus rendered the project a public, national endeavor and also a civic duty toward the symbolic heart of the nation.

Monica and Pedro’s encounter with Manuel captures the ambivalent subject positions of the artists and cultural producers who have moved to the historic center in the context of this initiative and with whom I conducted my research. Ranging from highly affluent professionals to struggling artists, these new residents of the historic center were relatively young, highly educated and in command of high concentrations of

cultural capital. They viewed themselves as morally progressive and cultivated alternative life styles. Bohemian and unconventional, they aspired to “shake the barriers” that separated them from people like Manuel, to establish new possibilities for and forms of sociability between different social groups. At the same time they found themselves embedded in Mexico’s class and racial tensions and hierarchies, where encounters generally take place in the form of patron-client relations of co-dependency.

As such, they related to Manuel in pedagogical terms, seeking for example to inculcate in him civility and respect for public space. Ultimately, however, they doubted the possibility of living together with him as neighbors. To be sure, as a drug addict perhaps involved in criminal activities Manuel represents an “extreme” case. But the anxieties and *faux passes* that pervaded the interaction above traversed new residents’ encounters with other lower class (or perceived as lower class) residents of the historic center. For, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, these lower class residents were at once the rescue’s intended beneficiaries and that from which the symbolic heart of the nation had to be recovered through the transformation of the urban landscape as well as the introduction of a sophisticated policing apparatus.

This dissertation is concerned with the instabilities and the boundaries that run through encounters such as the one that I related above. Focusing on encounter, proximity and quotidian interaction between different social groups in the nation’s most emblematic urban center, I explore the production and experience of class and racial distinctions in contemporary Mexico City. My interest is to understand how the new residents of the historic center, people like Monica and Pedro who belong to a young cultural elite, navigate the tension between what I will call their cosmopolitan



aspirations—a yearning to inhabit Mexico City as a cosmopolitan urban space comparable to other great capitals of the world—and their own embeddedness in Mexico’s class and racial hierarchies. Rather than focusing on the exclusions brought about by the rescue, I examine the sorts of urban encounters that it has generated. I analyze new residents’ desire for the city, imagined as a dense and socially mixed place, and I explore ethnographically how their cosmopolitan aspirations and their anxieties about the complicated realities of the historic center play out and are negotiated on the ground.

In what follows, I will inquire what it would mean to be cosmopolitan in today’s Mexico City, and who could claim this class position in the historic center. How, I will ask, are such claims destabilized? And what sorts of different temporalities come into play in the rescue of the historic center and in the imaginary of urban cosmopolitanism that it mobilizes? How do new residents navigate their cosmopolitan aspirations and their participation in the quotidian negotiations of life and citizenship in Mexico City’s historic center? At the same time, I will also examine how the rescue reflects contemporary transformations of the urban landscape and the ways in which different subjects use and experience it. In what ways do quotidian interactions at once reflect and produce new forms of social and political belonging? What do they tell us about the fate of the urban masses within present political ideologies and forms of governance?

I explore these questions in the course of five chapters, looking at multiple instances where new residents come together with the lower classes that inhabit the center and at once mobilize a desire for commonality and doubt its possibility. I focus in particular on interactions of new residents with the inhabitants of the center’s dilapidated

*vecindades*, such as the one described above, and the vendors of its informal street markets. The sorts of ambivalences that emerge in such interactions begin to come into view, for example, in the case of Ricardo, a cultural entrepreneur who moved to the affluent area of the historic center, which was also targeted by the rescue, where he opened an art gallery after returning from a stint in Paris. Ricardo once told me that, after living in the center, he had finally gotten to know another Mexico, which he described as “more sad but more fascinating.” He grew up in an exclusive residential neighborhood surrounded by slums in the outskirts of the city. While living there he never thought about what he called the “huge contrasts” within Mexican society, instead taking them for granted as the natural order of things. In the historic center, he said, it was different. He had become “more tolerant” and had learnt to see people like the lady who sold *tamales* in the street corner in a different light, “almost as neighbors.” However, he was worried that the city’s social contrasts were always a problem on the brink of explosion. In fact, he doubted that “they” had also become more tolerant and accepting of the possibility of living together.

Ricardo’s reflections suggest that aspirations to urban cosmopolitanism at once take shape and come into doubt in the urban encounter. He desires the historic center because it resounds, for him, with certain ideals of multiplicity, anonymity and tolerance. He wants to encounter the other as an innocuous, unremarkable stranger. But that same other constantly slides into a menacing force. New residents often referred to the masses of informal vendors and other workers that inhabited the center’s streets as the most pressing, and seemingly intractable, of the center’s problems. They talked about them as a cancer and a social plague that had to be eradicated at all costs in order to make the

historic center an inhabitable, enjoyable space. Those same masses were a central target of the security apparatus implemented in the context of rescue.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the characters that provoked fascination also appeared as menacing figures and as the object of new residents' anxieties about the always-present possibility that "rescue" would fail. They constantly slipped into the figure of "the criminal" until the distinction between them seemed to collapse.

In exploring these interactions, I trace connections between the images of the cosmopolitan that appear in my materials with longstanding apprehensions among Mexican elites of being out of joint with the present, of being trapped in a backward time, never able to catch up. Claudio Lomnitz (2001) has referred to such apprehensions as a continuing aspiration to an "unachieved modernity;" Fernando Escalante (1992: 227) has discussed them as a sense of permanently living in "a key of (not) yet." As an imagined spatial and temporal elsewhere, the cosmopolitan, I argue, stands in tension with other temporalities that have come to be blamed for the country's failures, and which in the historic center are particularly embodied by the urban masses.

A related, central concern of the dissertation is the circulation of particular idioms of individual responsibility and citizenship in the historic center and the affective investments that they engender. I interrogate how these idioms are part of new residents' lived experiences and how they mediate their quotidian interactions with other social groups. Let me return to Monica and Manuel to elaborate on this point. After the

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<sup>3</sup> The centrality of security for urban renewal at the historic center reproduced a discourse of law and order that has accompanied similar projects around the world, namely, to make areas safe for investment and inhabitable for certain classes. I will analyze this aspect of the rescue project in Chapter 5. See: Smith, N. (1996). The new urban frontier: gentrification and the revanchist city. London ; New York, Routledge.

“contact” that I described above, Manuel kept asking Pedro for free beers, a situation that drove the latter crazy and which was not easy to handle. Pedro did not want to provoke Manuel. Monica, on the other hand, insisted that Pedro charge something, at least two or three pesos (beers were fifteen pesos at the bar), for Manuel’s beers. According to her, Manuel needed to understand that things are not for free in life. One night as she was sitting at the bar with Manuel she told him he could help himself to some of her beer: “I paid for it, and therefore I can share it with you.” Manuel took the almost empty beer bottle but, when Monica got distracted, he tried to change it for someone else’s full bottle, which stood on an adjacent table. Monica caught him red handed and, without a word, changed the bottles back again. “Why did you do that if no one saw?” asked an annoyed Manuel. “I saw it,” was Monica’s reply, “and it is not right.” “You saw it, you saw it, you saw it,” muttered Manuel several times. Monica took this repetition as an indication that he had understood that his action was wrong.

Beyond enacting a commitment to abide by the rules and to take responsibility for her own actions, Monica expressed a similarly strong commitment to instill these values in Manuel. These affectively charged commitments to individual responsibility, I show throughout the dissertation, formed an important dimension of new residents’ cosmopolitans aspirations. Like her, many new residents imagined the cosmopolitan city as inhabited by a particular kind of citizen: civic minded, respectful of public space and tolerant of difference.

Attending to these idioms of responsibility and citizenship, I explore how the masses of the historic center figure in the discourse of rescue at once as subjects to be redeemed—civilized, educated, modernized—and as ineluctably non-assimilable others,

unfit for the requirements of the present. A central argument of this dissertation is that the situated anxieties that emerge from my materials articulate with broader and longstanding elite apprehensions about the popular masses, which have historically been construed in Mexico as the quintessential embodiment of the national subject and, at the same time, as the manifestation of atavistic residues. Moreover, I argue that the sense of threat and incommensurability that we find in the interactions that I examine divulges the persistence of a racial imaginary that, while disavowed by the myth of *mestizaje*, has remained inscribed at the heart of the nation and has long haunted elite imaginations of a modern, democratic Mexico.

Situating the rescue and the aspirations, fears and affective commitments of the new residents in a particular historical moment across the world, I argue that whereas the post-revolutionary national project sought to domesticate the putatively violent popular masses through their integration into the corporate structures of an authoritarian, one-party regime, today's neoliberal governance renders them as an uncontrollable, residual and threatening force. I thus trace relations between quotidian fears of crime and misrecognition in the oversaturated and socially mixed urban spaces of the historic center on the one hand, and wider debates and anxieties over democracy and citizenship on the other.

### **The Mayor and the Billionaire to the Rescue**

In the summer of 2001 Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) of the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) unveiled a project to revitalize Mexico City's historic center in close collaboration with multimillionaire Carlos Slim, at

the time the country's (and now the world's) wealthiest citizen. The rescue—as the project came to be known—and the prominent participation of civil society as represented by Mr. Slim himself were swiftly commended in the press and in the electronic media as a long-overdue response to the worrying state of abandonment and decay of this emblematic space. Slim's involvement, I repeatedly heard throughout my research, was a key element that could ensure the long-term sustainability and, ultimately, the success of the project.

From the start Slim played a prominent role in the rescue, which put critical emphasis on the renovation of residential buildings for middle to high-income housing and on public safety. As president of its executive committee (composed of various public figures as well as representatives of the federal and local governments) he was charged with overseeing the project's execution. At the same time he created two additional bodies to work closely together in the historic center: the Historic Center Foundation (henceforth the Foundation), a non-profit organization responsible for generating adequate conditions for the settlement of new residents through social, artistic and cultural programs, and which proposed the division of the center into various “corridors,” each specializing in different activities; and the Historic Center Real Estate Company, which buys and restores buildings for both residential and business use, and which also works to rekindle the area's real estate market.<sup>4</sup> For its part, Mexico City's government put the Fideicomiso Centro Histórico (henceforth the Fideicomiso) in charge

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<sup>4</sup> According to the manager of the Historic Center Real State Company they acquired seventy buildings in the areas to be targeted by renovation (the financial and cultural “corridors”) before the first phase of the rescue started in early 2002. By late 2006 the number of buildings they owned was close to one hundred and twenty (Interview with author, November 6, 2006).

of coordinating and carrying out the public works of rescue, from the renovation of streets and sidewalks to the removal of street vendors from certain areas.<sup>5</sup> Slim also partially funded the massive public security apparatus that was introduced in the historic center as part of the project. It consisted of a newly created police unit trained in the broken windows model,<sup>6</sup> as well as a sophisticated surveillance technology including hundreds of short-circuit security cameras and panic buttons connected to the local police office.

In early 2001, before the commencement of the rescue, the historic center was a no-go area for vast segments of Mexico City's inhabitants. Although it remained an important commercial hub and a tourist attraction (concentrating some of the city's most important museums and cultural institutions), for many middle and upper middle-class residents of the city the historic center had acquired the stigma of an abandoned, chaotic and dangerous space: filled with street vendors who blocked entire streets to vehicular traffic and sold illegal commodities; plagued by petty crime, noise, garbage and pollution. Among Mexico's social and cultural elites there seemed to be a virtually unquestioned consensus about the need to "rescue" this space. Take, for example, the following editorial, which appeared in the national daily *Reforma* one day after the

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<sup>5</sup> In December 2006, Marcelo Ebrard, the new Mayor of Mexico City, created the *Autoridad del Centro Histórico* (Historic Center Authority), led by Dr. Alejandra Moreno Toscano. Since early 2007 this new body has followed through with renovation works and has expanded them to other areas of the historic center, including the areas north and east of the Zocalo, which were excluded during the first phase.

<sup>6</sup> The broken windows model of policing, first proposed by George Kelling, claims that preventing minor transgressions in urban space, such as loitering or graffiti, may help prevent full-fledge criminality. This model was championed and popularized by the ex-mayor of New York Rudolph Giuliani, who recommended its implementation in Mexico City in a private consultancy to the local government. For a discussion of this model as implemented in New York see: Smith, N. (1998). "Giuliani Time: The Revanchist 1990s." *Social Text* 16(4): 1-20, Feldman, A. (2001). "White Public Space and the Political Geography of Public Safety." *Social Text* 19(3): 57-89.

project's announcement:

The Historic Center of Mexico City is the heart of the country. I say it without exaggerated localism. It is. It is a wonder abandoned in the midst of a pigsty. Which is not fair. (...) There is not one well-bred *capitalino* (Mexico City inhabitant) who does not want to recuperate, preserve, make green, beautify and love his or her city. You debate and then invite us. We will be there (Dehesa 2001).<sup>7</sup>

As I will discuss throughout the dissertation, the discourse of rescue (an assemblage of expert reports, urban planning schemes, public declarations, press articles, artistic and cultural projects, and so forth) reproduced this image of the center as a “problem space,” afflicted by poverty, disorder, illegality *and* criminality, and therefore as demanding intervention.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it emphasized the fact that the historic center has gradually but steadily lost its residential character since the late nineteenth century. The center thus appeared in this discourse as a simultaneously “taken over” and “empty” space. Consider the following excerpt from an interview with a high executive of the Foundation:

Besides the buildings, everyday life [in the center] is very important. I mean, the history that has passed through it, and, well, if you have been there you have seen all the commotion. I do feel that it is very rich. And it was depopulating, it was being abandoned, it was becoming an area, well, abandoned. So it definitely deserves not to lose that (Interview with author, March 27, 2006).

Parts of the center did indeed lose their residential character almost completely as the city expanded. Others, particularly the lower class areas in the northeast and the southwest, experienced some decline of residents but continued to be inhabited. So while

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<sup>7</sup> All excerpts from fieldnotes, recorded interviews and newspaper materials were translated by the author.

<sup>8</sup> This is an excerpt from the report that served as the basis for the rescue plan: [T]he Historic Center concentrates all the challenges of the city as a whole: unemployment and underemployment, marginality and social exclusion, insecurity and criminality, prostitution, homelessness and drug addiction, traffic congestion and pollution, low schooling and income levels, housing shortages, deterioration of the urban environment and of heritage, and conflicts between different social sectors. (2000). Programa para el Desarrollo Integral del Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México. México, D.F., Fideicomiso Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México: 48.



not only the space but also its inhabitants appeared as objects of rescue in this discourse, the latter were also to blame for the center's decay and deterioration, as expressed in this excerpt from a press interview with Aldo Flores, a veteran public artist who organized a collective artistic "take over" of a colonial plaza in 2002:

This is a dangerous area, where people were fed up with theft, drug addiction and prostitution. It was like a rat's nest and today the gardens are clean, the murals serve as protection to the building and there are no homeless (Ibarra 2006).

In the discourse of rescue, culture appeared as the privileged tool for redeeming the (poor) inhabitants of the historic center, where artistic initiatives would, according to an expert's report, "serve as detonators for change" (2000). At the same time the historic center had to, once and for all, be liberated of all the obstacles holding it back in order to become an inhabitable—but also a cosmopolitan—space.<sup>9</sup> Let us recall the newspaper editorial that I quoted above about the rescue project. The editorialist, known for his satirical humor, called the historic center "a wonder abandoned in the midst of a pigsty" and claimed that all "well bred *capitalinos*" would want to recuperate this space. While responsible citizens valued the historic center as a patrimonial space and worked to recuperate it, he seemed to be suggesting, those who had turned it into a pigsty were beyond the pale of citizenship.

The public-private nature of the rescue project, which was celebrated as a most natural state of affairs, would have been unthinkable only a few decades earlier, when the management of "national heritage" was the exclusive prerogative of the state. Indeed, a

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<sup>9</sup> The term that I encountered most often in reference to the project was "the rescue" (el rescate), but I also came across other terms such as "recovery" (recuperación) and "revitalization" (revitalización). With slightly different meanings, these terms all gesture to a particular temporality: not only has the historic center been "taken over" but, very importantly, it will be transformed into something else.

crucial source of the post-revolutionary state's legitimacy was that its role as the protector of that which belonged to the nation. In sharp contrast, the current rescue suggested that it was through a privatization of sorts that "heritage" would be saved. But this was a strange alliance in other ways as well. It brought together the center-left mayor of the PRD famous (or infamous) for his populist rhetoric and policies and the third richest man in the world, famous (or, again, infamous) for his ruthless monopolistic capitalism.

The current rescue project had its roots already in the previous administration (1997-2000). In the summer of 1997 Mexico City's inhabitants democratically elected their Mayor for the first time since 1929.<sup>10</sup> Cuauhtémoc Cardenas, of the recently founded Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), won by a landslide.<sup>11</sup> Besides promising a more participatory government and a number of redistributive policies, Cardenas made the support of arts and culture in public spaces, especially in underprivileged neighborhoods and among vulnerable populations (such as youth), a top priority (Nivón Bolán 2000). The goal, he proclaimed, was to get people out into the streets again. The historic center became an important target of these policies. One of the

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<sup>10</sup> Until that date, it had been the president's prerogative to designate this figure, which subordinated Mexico City's policies to the whims of the federal government and allowed the one-party regime to secure control of the city.

<sup>11</sup> Since their overwhelming victory in 1997 the PRD party has governed Mexico City with a combination of neoliberal policies aimed at creating the conditions for international investment and a wide range of social policies. They have fostered a redevelopment of the central city (beyond the historic center), by creating "corridors" and pursuing a liberalized urban real estate market and have made the fighting of crime and insecurity one of their top priorities. The PRD was created by a number of politicians, Cardenas included, who broke with the PRI, as well as leftist militants. As I will discuss in other chapters (especially Chapters 4 and 6) it has inherited many of the corporatist structures formerly controlled by the PRI in the city. Ward, P. M. and E. Durden (2004). *Gobierno y democracia en el Distrito federal: Cardenas, el PRD y el huevo del parroco. Los ultimos cien anos. Los proximos cien...* A. Rodríguez Kuri and S. Tamayo Flores-Alattore. Mexico, D.F., Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana: 189-235.

new government's most popular programs consisted in organizing free massive concerts in the Zócalo—the historic center's colossal central square—by famous international musicians. These concerts attracted tens of thousands of people of different socio-economic status to the center and no doubt contributed to its reactivation. Cardenas also commissioned a diagnostic study of the historic center to a group of prestigious urban planners and sociologists. The study, which included a “participatory” methodology (such as conducting workshops with local inhabitants), offered a grim assessment of the center and proposed a series of measures to promote its re-population through the creation of mixed income housing. It was later to serve as a vague referent for AMLO and Slim's rescue.

But it would be misleading to assume that the rescue was a set of coherent policies. Trying to piece together what the rescue consisted in from a policy perspective was among the most exasperating endeavors of my research. Each of the institutions and actors involved had their own vision and projects. To begin with, as opposed to his predecessor, mayor AMLO significantly reduced the city's budget for culture, citing a need for austerity measures. He all but stopped promoting massive free concerts in the Zocalo. Far from a consistent set of economic, social or cultural policies (for example low income housing policies),<sup>12</sup> the rescue was a “do as you go” project that concentrated its efforts on the architectural remodeling of the central, most affluent area of the historic center and on the introduction of heavy policing. It included no plan to intervene in the

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<sup>12</sup> The Instituto de Vivienda del Distrito Federal (Mexico City's Housing Institute) had a housing policy that targeted old dilapidated *vecindades* in the area, but it was implemented separately from the rescue. This lack of a centralized policy has changed since the new administration took charge of the rescue in 2007 and created the *Autoridad del Centro Histórico*. See footnote five.

more impoverished and dangerous areas to the east and north of the Zocalo, or to foster private investments there. The Foundation, on its part, also lacked a coherent vision. When I first met its young director I asked him whether they had anticipated possible tensions between new comers and old inhabitants in the southwest of the center, a reasonable expectation considering that the area in question was densely populated and featured entrenched social problems. He laughed nervously and “confessed” that there was a lot of improvising in the rescue.

### **Sensuous Space, Monumental Space**

As I strolled through the streets of the historic center in early January 2006, the rescue was already in full swing. A freshly arrived anthropologist in the field, I remember thinking about Benjamin’s imagery of *flanerie*, considered by some as the quintessential form of urban ethnography (See for example: Mbembe 2004). “How would one be a *flaneur* here?” I thought as I elbowed my way through the crowded sidewalks. I was constantly pushed and shoved by a slow-moving multitude of pedestrians as I walked past a variety of odorous food stalls and loud vending stands. It was a few days before the sixth of January, the Day of the Three Kings, a widely popular holiday in Mexico City that includes giving gifts to children. For this reason, some of the recently remodeled streets at the heart of the historic center, especially Tacuba, had been inundated with street vendors and consumers. I later learned that, as they did every year, the local authorities had granted special permits for vendors to sell there during the holidays, on the condition that they voluntarily leave the renovated streets (and only the renovated streets) after the Three Kings Day.

These were, then, especially hectic times. But the historic center always impresses itself upon the visitor as a crowded, eventful and overtly sensuous space. During the day its sidewalks are perennially filled with residents, passers-by, shoppers, tourists and office workers. Its streets are hopelessly jammed with traffic. On any given day at least one political organization can be found camping on the Zócalo, its emblematic central public square, and, quite likely, a protest march can be spotted proceeding through its streets as well.

All this hustle and bustle takes place in a landscape that juxtaposes the most varied architectural styles and epochs and that confers a special charm upon the center: from the city's first skyscraper built of steel and glass in 1956, to convents and churches originally built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from baroque palaces made of red *tezontle* (the most widely used stone in the center and which gives its architecture a particular texture) to twentieth century art-deco constructions, or to buildings dating from the 1950s and 60s and bereft of any determinate style or aesthetic value. Many ground floors in the historic center have storefronts dedicated to the most disparate commercial activities, from rare and used bookshops to musical instrument shops, from opticians to wholesale jewelry stores, from elegant restaurants frequented by senators and high level bureaucrats to cheap food joints, and from trendy clothing stores to tailoring shops offering custom made men's suits.

In the more populated and impoverished areas north and east of the Zócalo, street-vending activities have taken over entire streets, closing them to vehicular traffic. Usually four (though sometimes as many as six) rows of vending stands stretch along the most crowded streets in these areas, leaving narrow alleys for consumers to walk. In some

cases vending stands are “semi-permanent”, consisting of tables that are dismantled everyday. “Permanent” stands, on the other hand, are made of tubular structures that remain in place after the end of the working day. These thoroughfares are densely crowded every day (except for Sundays), saturated by a cacophony of sounds, from the sounds of music CDs playing salsa, alarm clocks, or battery-powdered toys to vendors advertising their merchandise through the endless repetition of formulaic phrases that acquire the sound of chants...

Over here, over here

Take it for ten pesos

Enveloping all are the murmurs of the crowd. The vendors’ merchandise itself ranges from counterfeited brand names—Nike sneakers, Gucci purses, Armani perfumes—to illegally copied or “pirate” (to use the local term) CDs and DVDs, mass produced cheap garments, school supplies, toys, and cosmetics.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the early confusion that accompanies fieldwork, I remember my first days in the historic center as distinctly disorientating. This was a very familiar place for me. I had been its most assiduous visitor during my college years—when I lived in Mexico City for the first time—and I had spent entire weeks there in preliminary fieldwork trips. This, however, was the first time that I actually lived there and it was an entirely new experience. As I moved around to buy things I needed for my apartment I was constantly

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<sup>13</sup> Besides retail shoppers, small merchants from all over the city or from neighboring towns come to this area of the historic center on a regular basis to buy wholesale for their businesses. It is important to note that the presence of vendors in this area, and indeed in the entire historic center, has nearly disappeared since the fall of 2007, when the current government undertook the task of relocating all street vendors in the center. See: Silva Londoño, D. A. "Comercio ambulante en el Centro Histórico de la ciudad de México (1990-2007)." *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 72(2): 195-224.

overstimulated by the multitudes, the smells, and the cacophony of noises to be heard on any given street: all sorts of music fragments, the chants of vendors, the honking of cars, the whistles of policemen.

In those early days, and as I was preparing to embark on full-fledged fieldwork, I often remembered a conversation that I had with two executives of the Foundation during a preliminary visit a few months earlier. Their ambition, they had told me, was to turn the historic center into another Soho, a reference to the chic New York neighborhood that was gentrified during the 1980s. On the sixth of January I wrote in my field notes: “How do they negotiate their reference to gentrification, their aspiration to turn the center into a chic neighborhood, with the density, the ebb and flow, and the messy realities ‘on the ground’? How do they ‘sell’ their project?” This struck me as a far more multilayered space than the paradigmatic cases of gentrification in cities like New York, London or Barcelona. There were too many stakes here. It was a meaningful and important space for an enormously wide variety of people; home for tens of thousands. This was a space that concentrates, some times within the space of a few blocks, the sharp contrasts and inequalities of Mexican society. It was a space of popular and high-end consumption, a space of leisure and protest, the biggest street market in the city, a space of underworld activities, from prostitution to drug trafficking. And it was, above all, a space that over the years has become invested with an enormous symbolic power, a sort of metonym of the nation.

In both official representation and popular imagination the historic center contains, in a multiplicity of juxtaposed layers, the nation’s history and heritage. It embodies the mixture of cultures that constitute the *mestizo* nation. This emblematic centrality is

especially evident around the Zócalo, the massive public square at the heart of the historic center and symbolically the most important political square in the country. With an enormous national flag permanently fluttering at its center, the Zócalo is surrounded by such iconic buildings as the National Palace, the Supreme Court, the Metropolitan Cathedral and, just a few meters to the north east, the excavated ruins of the *Templo Mayor*, the main Aztec temple (See Figure 1). For decades this square was one of the main sites for the staging of “post-revolutionary nationalism,” through a multiplicity of civic rituals, and it has become the privileged stage for political protest (Alonso 2004).

The vast and heterogeneous space that is officially called the “historic center” consists of roughly eight hundred blocks, the city as it existed until the mid nineteenth century. This term, however, was not much in use until very recently. And even today many of the city’s inhabitants refer simply to “*el centro*,” a term whose spatial referent varies widely between people. It generally designates a smaller area around the Zócalo, the oldest in the city.





Figure 1. View of the Zócalo from the West (the financial corridor), with National Palace behind the flag. Photograph by Nitzan Shoshan

In the late sixteenth century, Mexico City was built upon the ruins of the conquered Aztec capital and organized around a central square, the Plaza Mayor, which would later become the Zócalo. The Spanish city extended to the southwest of this square, while the northeast, more prone to flooding due to its proximity to the lake of Texcoco, was reserved for Indian barrios. As the city grew this division expanded and the capital entered the nineteenth century—and Mexico's independent era—with a small elegant area (known today as the financial corridor) surrounded by slums. In the second half of nineteenth century the elites started to abandon the center for newly developed residential areas southwest of the city, and old colonial mansions gave way to *vecindades* (Lear

1996; Piccato 2001). Often blamed for the center's decline, *vecindades* became the quintessential form of housing with which the center is associated.<sup>14</sup>

As the urban center of a rapidly growing metropolis, the old colonial city underwent massive transformations throughout the twentieth century, from the destruction of countless "historical monuments" that gave way to new constructions to the razing of entire blocks in whose stead wider roads and avenues were built as part of the state's modernizing project (Monnet 1995:268). Yet, as the old city, it retained a key economic centrality well into the 1950s and was the foremost arrival place for migrants who came en masse to Mexico City after the 1940s (Lewis 1961; Zamorano 2007). After the 1985 earthquake wrought havoc in the area (a topic to which I will return below), leaving countless buildings destroyed or severely damaged, the center's depopulation hastened exponentially, together with its deterioration.

The transformation of the center in the name of modernization and its gradual depopulation and decline were concomitant with its monumentalization, both through its construal as national heritage and through its physical transformation into a visual representation of the post-revolutionary regime. Nowhere was this transformation more palpable than at the Zócalo. As the central square of the central city, this space had historically encompassed a variety of functions, including commerce (through the presence of established and informal markets at different periods), leisure (through green areas), and transportation (through several tramway stops). It was remade into a

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<sup>14</sup> With the 1942 freezing of rents these buildings were practically abandoned by landlords and government programs alike, reaching unbearably squalid conditions as time passed. The number of *vecindades* in the historic center has steadily decreased since the 1950s, reflecting the wider depopulation trends of the area. See: Connolly, P. (2001). Urban Slum Report: The case of Mexico City: 38.

monumental, empty square suitable for mass displays of state power by the 1940s and it has remained so ever since (Monnet: 267).

In 1980, following the archeological discovery of an Aztec stone-goddess in the northeast vicinity of the Zócalo, President López Portillo issued a decree that designated an area of 9.2 square kilometers in the old colonial city as a “zone of historical monuments” and officially named it the “Historic Center of Mexico City.” Shortly thereafter entire blocks of colonial era buildings were demolished to give way to archeological excavations of the Aztec main temple or *Templo Mayor*, which has subsequently become one of the country’s prime archeological sites. The decree was a grandiose gesture that exemplified the excesses of a post-revolutionary regime that would soon be dismantled. In an overtly hyperbolic tone it proclaimed the “dignity” of Mexico City and its authentically Mexican (that is, *mestizo*) character, which fused “Indigenous and European elements.” The seven-page document provided a lengthy sketch of the official history—and chronology—not only of the city but also of the nation, in effect fusing the two. It described the area as “a notable expression of the Mesoamerican urban tradition,” as the political and social center of New Spain during the period of “Spanish domination,” and as the stage of the most important events in national history, “ranging from the armed struggles to obtain independence and, later, national sovereignty against international interests, to the triumph of the Republic and of the Mexican Revolution” (Ibid: 276).

In accordance with its purported centrality in the nation’s history, the decree placed the entire area—and not only individual “monuments,” as with previous legislations—within the category of *patrimonio* or national heritage. It divided this area into two

“perimeters.” The first, known as perimeter “A,” delimited the city as it existed towards the end of the colonial period, that is, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Surrounding it, perimeter “B” included the city as it existed before its outward expansion in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is on a small section of perimeter “A” that the rescue project has concentrated its efforts (See Figure 2).

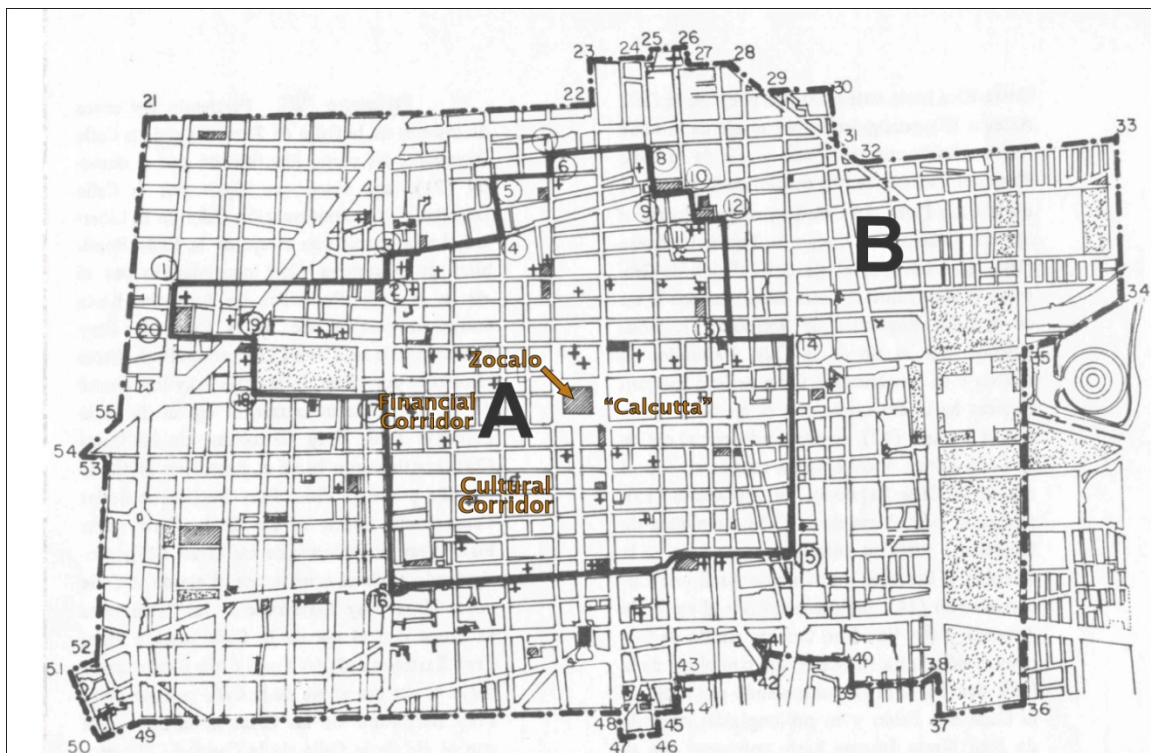


Figure 2. Map of the historic center with “perimeters.” The rescue targeted two small areas of perimeter “A,” which were designated as “the financial corridor” and “the cultural corridor.” Source: Fideicomiso Centro Histórico

The 1980 decree thus placed the “historic center” within an exceptional regime of value and invested it with an aura of authenticity and historical depth.<sup>15</sup> In its appearance

<sup>15</sup> Previous legislation had catalogued hundreds of buildings as “monuments” to be preserved. A 1934 law, for example, catalogued more than 700 hundred buildings, more than half of which were lost in subsequent decades, as well as specific squares and streets within today’s Historic Center, including the buildings that surrounded them. The first area to be protected was that surrounding the Zocalo, though a law passed in 1931. In 1938 the National Institute for History and Archeology (INAH) was created as a centralized, federal institution to oversee the conservation of heritage and to actively intervene in its renovation. Ever

as heritage, the center is construed and mobilized as a space endowed with an inherent dignity that has been, as it were, violated by undignified practices and that therefore must be rescued. From this perspective, *vecindades* and street vending activities appear as denigrating heritage. To be sure, and as we shall see repeatedly in the course of this study, the center exceeds its construction as the “historic center.” And yet this construction has had profound and lasting effects on its organization and on its place in the imaginary of the city’s inhabitants. Its unique status came across in the words of the chief of police who, telling me about the difficulties of policing the area, expressed his frustration at the many problems that landed at his feet because of the idea that the center is, in his own words, a “ceremonial space:”

There are guys who come all the way from *Ciudad Neza* (a poor area in the outskirts of the city) to smoke joints in the flagpole [of the Zócalo]. I have asked them why come all the way [to the center] to smoke up and they reply (he imitates the tone of someone under the influence of marijuana) ‘because it feels much cooler here’ (*porque aquí se siente mucho más chido*) (Interview with author June 2, 2006).

### **Urban Lifestyles, Cosmopolitan Aspirations**

Within the rescue project, both the center’s density and monumentality articulated well with contemporary trends in urban governance. Several urban scholars have traced major shifts in the city and in the urban experience under conditions of late capitalism (Low 1996; Smith 1996; Harvey 2001; Brenner and Theodore 2002). They have pointed to the transformation of an urbanism that included redistributive social policies (such as public housing) to another form based on a service and finance economy. These trends

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since, the INAH has held great power over the historic center. See: Melé, P. (1995). "La construcción jurídica de los centros históricos: patrimonio y políticas urbanas en México." *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 57(1): 183-205.

have been accompanied by the privatization of urban services (such as transportation), the re-commodification of central spaces and an increased participation of private and global capital in urban redevelopment schemes, including gentrification (especially through public-private partnerships). If in this context the state has “retreated” as a social arbiter and service provider, becoming more of a “facilitator” or “partner” of private capital, it has at the same time heightened its presence in the field of policing and control. This is a process that Neil Smith (2002) has called “making the city safe for gentrification” through the introduction of tough policing measures and the criminalization of the urban poor (See also: Wacquant 2001).

The shifting urban landscapes visible across the world, from the post-industrial cities of the north to the growing megalopolises of the south, are inscribed within that larger context of changing ideological commitments and political horizons (i.e., an unflinching “faith” in the “free market”) that has been subsumed under the umbrella term of “neoliberalism” (Rose, Barry et al. 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). But, as Brenner and Theodore (2002) have cautioned, “neoliberal” urbanism must be understood less as a unified ideological or political field and more as a set of disparate processes always embedded in particular contexts, local political configurations and specific regulatory regimes that impact particular spaces and populations in distinct ways. This caveat no doubt applies to the rescue of Mexico City’s historic center.

As I have already mentioned above, the rescue has by no means formed a coherent project or set of public policies. It has been, rather, an uneasy blend of different visions of the city, varied political and economic interests, incongruent policies and “do as you go” solutions. And yet, it bears the marks of “neoliberal” urbanism: it is a public-private

partnership (of sorts); it entails the commodification of the city's central space (and of national heritage) and the mobilization of globally circulating imaginaries and aesthetics of the urban; it involves aggressive policing and the criminalization and displacement of the urban poor, especially the center's "informal" dwellers. Moreover, the rescue reflects shifting ideological commitments and forms of governance, and in particular the receding political horizon of social welfare, a point to which I shall return below.

While the literature on neoliberal urbanism provides insights for understanding the rescue as inscribed within changing economic, political and cultural landscapes across the world, it falls short of grasping the subtleties of the urban experience and the aspirations, desires and contradictions of urban dwellers. For lived experiences always exceed and thus destabilize such rigid categories as "exclusion" or "resistance" that tend to pervade the literature on neoliberal urbanism and gentrification (Fennell 2009). In this dissertation, I have aimed to capture the lived experience of the subjects who are the rescue's protagonists "on the ground," of the men and women who have made their homes in the historic center over the past several years, while taking into account as well the center's significance as a multilayered, symbolic and national space. What, I ask in the chapters below, are the new residents' aspirations and motivations? How do they make sense of their urban experiences? How do they navigate the contradictions of their positions?

What interests me, then, is not so much whether or not gentrification is taking place in Mexico City's historic center, but rather how it serves as an important reference (a model to aspire to and emulate) for planners and consumers alike, from Foundation executives to the artists and young professionals that I met throughout my fieldwork. I



constantly came across evocations of New York, London or Barcelona in the historic center, and the fact that I lived and studied in New York was often a conversation starter. This provenance, as it were, positioned me as belonging with the social milieus that I was studying, a belonging that entailed methodological and ethical complications upon which I will have more to say later in the introduction. But the point to be made here is that New York and other major advanced capitalist cities provided a crucial reference within a particular cosmopolitan imaginary that was an important driving force behind the rescue.

Crucial to the rescue plan as a real-estate operation was the possibility of mobilizing certain contemporary imaginaries of the urban through the juxtaposition of the authentically vintage with the ultra-modern. The Foundation advertised the majority of its rentals as “loft-style apartments,” a telltale reference to gentrification. Ranging from nineteenth century neo-classic constructions to twentieth century art-deco former office buildings, they included studios, one and two bedroom apartments whose sizes and architectural finishes varied widely between buildings. Some were ample and luxuriously renovated and were directed to young and affluent professionals. Others were modest studios or single rooms in old hotels directed to students of limited economic resources.

The term loft originally referred to spaces previously used for manufacturing and converted to residential use, particularly in cities in the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe. Its ascendance was concomitant with the de-industrialization of urban centers and the transformation of the urban from manufacturing to service functions. It also designated a move “back” to the city first initiated by artists in search of urban experiences, affordable rents, ample spaces to work, and a revalorization of “historical” constructions (Zukin 1982). But the loft quickly transcended the specific historical and



material conditions of its emergence. It became a central symbol of contemporary “urban lifestyles” (Zukin 1998). From New York to Buenos Aires, from Tokyo to Mexico City, lofts and “loft-style” apartments have sprawled. The flagship of urban redevelopment projects and gentrification processes, they bear associations of cosmopolitan sophistication, a specific urban aesthetics imbued with neo-bohemian undertones, historical “depth” and preservation, luxury and cultural capital.

With the reference to the “loft-style” the Foundation mobilized these associations, including the value of living in “historical buildings” and in the historic center itself. In press conferences, public appearances and informal conversations, Foundation executives expressed their aspiration to transform the center into another Soho. To this end they also promoted the opening of particular consumption spaces, especially restaurants, bars and art galleries. Security was equally central to this venture. As I mentioned before, Slim’s representatives were crucially involved in the design and implementation of security operations and the Foundation advertised its security arrangements to new and prospective residents and investors.

The Foundation catered to and attracted mostly young professionals, members of the “creative industries” (architects, graphic designers, publicists, people working in the advertisement or music industry) and, to a lesser extent, bureaucrats and investment bankers working on nearby Reforma Avenue, as well as artists, students and cultural entrepreneurs. Many among the new residents with whom I conducted my fieldwork, whose ages ranged from the mid twenties to the mid forties, had previously lived in cities such as New York, Paris or Barcelona. Others had traveled extensively. International art was a crucial reference for a great number among them. The center attracted them

because it promised the kind of urban experience that these global references implied.

Consider for example Armando, a thirty two year old freelance film producer. He lived in a loft-style one-bedroom apartment on the sixth floor of a meticulously renovated art deco building that, like other similar buildings nearby, housed many single or recently married young professionals. The son of a Mexican father and a German mother Armando grew up in an upper middle class neighborhood west of the historic center and attended the prestigious German school. As a teenager he moved with his family to a small city in the interior and only returned to the capital in time to study communication and design at a small private university. Upon finishing college he began work in Mexico's advertising industry, eventually founding his own film production company, which mostly specialized in commercial advertising and television programs.

Armando moved to the historic center in the summer of 2003 after learning about the rescue and the availability of housing options from a childhood friend. A very sociable and committed person who liked to boast about his many accomplishments he was an avid promoter of a sense of community among new residents, continuously organizing social events and public meetings to discuss common concerns. Armando eventually made himself into a sort of unofficial mediator between new residents, Foundation executives and the local authorities, a position of power that he carefully cultivated by closely guarding his "contacts" and "connections." The following is an excerpt from an interview conducted with him in September 2006:

The people I met in [my] building, they were people who had travelled, who had lived in other countries (...) I don't know if you've had the chance to be in a great city, in other countries, but that feeling that the smells and the sounds, that everything is new (...) I had that feeling every day when I moved [to the historic center]. I still have it. Each day you discover something new. That feeling, like in

New York, that although you know it, at least your neighborhood, you still discover things, and every day is something new. (...) All this I experienced—and I agree with a lot of people who also lived abroad. It is like living in New York, or living in London, or living in Paris, in another city, great city, with old buildings. (Interview with author, September 27, 2006).

Armando expressed a cosmopolitan imaginary that I encountered over and over again throughout my fieldwork among the historic center's new residents: a desire not only for the city as such but more precisely for an urban experience associated with "other great cities" in Europe and the United States. London, Paris and New York were imagined as exemplary of such cosmopolitan places: dense, dynamic, socially mixed, public, fit for pedestrians, worldly, and with a sense of beauty and aesthetics. Entangled with these images was another sense of the urban cosmopolitan, namely that these cities were well planned, orderly and safe. For new residents the rescue promised to foster the cosmopolitan potentials of Mexico City's historic center, to bring this space into the global cosmopolitan present. It was the figure of Carlos Slim that provided them with a powerful guarantee for this promise.

In the same interview Armando proclaimed his cosmopolitan credentials by bragging about the ease with which he negotiated the social heterogeneity of the historic center, the densest of the city's spaces, where different social classes have traditionally mingled as they went about their business, shopping, strolling or demonstrating:

The experience of meeting people of different socio-economic backgrounds, of different cultures, one already had that previous experience [having lived abroad], and one adapts very fast to any environment, because one no longer has prejudices, one sees people as human beings, regardless of their color, their socioeconomic status, because one has already lived it before, although one comes from a privileged cradle, right? (Interview with author, September 27, 2006).

Like Roberto, the cultural entrepreneur that I mentioned above, part of Armando's

fascination with the social heterogeneity of the center stemmed from his daily encounters with what he called its “characters” (*personajes*), for example the shoeshine outside his building, the street musician nearby, the kids from the *vecindad*, or the corner shop clerk. These charismatic figures also included those belonging to the center’s underworld, such as the lowlife or the transvestite. But hand in hand with such attraction to the center’s “characters”—romantic remnants of a supposedly bygone era—and to the possibility of developing a certain intimacy with them, Armando repeatedly stressed that the historic center ought be rescued from people who lacked the basic rules of civility and denigrated public space, especially street vendors and others who engaged in informal or illegal activities:

If you live here, you are bothered by noise, from the saxophonist that plays the same out of tune song ten times in a row, to the street book vendor screaming for hours on end, in the same block, or the little three-peso stores; they are also a cancer for the center, because they make noise and they don’t respect the law (Interview with author, September 27, 2006).

Like many urban dwellers, new residents oscillated between two horizons of desire. On the one hand, they were attracted to the historic center for the urban experience that it offered, which included the possibility of encountering the unfamiliar, even the dangerous. On the other hand, they aspired to a domesticated experience of the city, with heavily policed spaces and the eradication of people and practices perceived to be threatening. The cosmopolitan (imagined as a location, a temporality and a state of being) provided a link between these two horizons while at the same time keeping them in tension. In this sense the new residents embodied the contradiction of the artist—or of the bohemian of old—caught between his fascination (and often also proximity) with the urban masses and his bourgeois sensibilities and aspirations. They oscillated between

fascination with the center and aversion towards its disorder, its dangers, and the people who dwelled in its (often intimate) spaces. These “characters,” then, certainly formed an important part of the center’s charisma, of that which provided its distinctly urban flavor, and at least for some artists and cultural producers, of a landscape to be intervened upon (through public art as well as cultural projects). And yet, those same “characters” were a constant source of fear and anxiety.

Throughout the dissertation, I argue that the contradictions embodied by new residents, their particular suspension between two horizons of desire, must be located within the specific history and affective registers of class distinctions and hierarchies in Mexico and their particular reconfigurations in the present. I approach these relations through the figure of the “patron-client.” Class distinctions, I submit, are produced and experienced in relations of hierarchical dependency and ambiguous intimacies. These, I show, become destabilized in the historic center in the context of residential contiguity between social classes and within a national project to “rescue” the symbolic heart of the nation. While new residents view themselves as members of global cosmopolitan elites, they are also embedded in the here and now, a reality that demands constant and situated negotiations, informal arrangements, and the mobilization of personal relations. But I’m getting ahead of the argument. Let me continue, instead, by turning to consider what the figure of the crowd might tell us about the relation between the urban cosmopolitan and class distinctions.

### **The City, the Crowd, the Stranger**

A vast literature in urban studies (including in anthropology, geography, and urban

planning) laments the loss of urban public space, or at least its decline in recent decades through the proliferation of “gated communities,” security apparatuses and heavy policing (Caldeira 2000). A central concern that runs through this literature is that “public space” no longer serves as a site of anonymity and democratic encounter, and that instead it has become “privatized.” Take, for example, Teresa Caldeira’s argument in *City of Walls* (2000), an ethnography of urban segregation in Sao Paolo, Brazil:

The idea of going for a walk, of naturally passing among strangers, the act of passing through the crowd that symbolizes the modern experience of the city, are all compromised in a city of walls. People feel restricted in their movements, afraid and controlled; they go out less at night, walk less on the street, and avoid the forbidden zones that loom larger and larger in every resident’s mental map of the city, especially among the elite (p. 267).

Caldeira stresses a normative urban ideal of openness and accessibility for all. She argues that the encounter with social alterity made possible by an open, diversified and densely populated public space is conducive to democratic politics. This assumption in turn rests upon a clear separation between the “private” domain and the “public” one. The latter, where strangers come together in anonymity, forms according to Caldeira a crucial condition for democratic politics and citizenship. In her own words: “This ideal of the open city, tolerant to social differences and their negotiation in anonymous encounters, crystallizes what I call the modern and democratic public space” (Ibid: 303). A normative modern “public space” appears in Caldeira’s argument in a descriptive register. In its architectural dimension, that is, as the streets and plazas of the city, public space is used here as isomorphic with the Habermasian “bourgeois public sphere,” where strangers come together to engage in rational deliberation and where a similar tension between the normative and the descriptive obtains.

Caldeira rightly insists upon the significance of the material dimension of public life, or how the built environment enables (and hinders) certain forms of sociability. And yet I would argue that attention to the figure of the crowd destabilizes the democratic ideal of public space as a place of anonymous bourgeois civility, suggesting instead that it is constitutively traversed by boundaries and anxieties. Indeed, images of metropolitan modernity are inseparable from ambivalent images of the crowd. The latter appears in them both as the nascent mass public of liberal democracy—as exemplified in the figure of the Parisian *flâneur*—and as an uncontrollable force, the intermittently riotous urban mob that must be kept at bay. It is potentially emancipatory and an atomized, mechanized collection of individuals. It is the condition of possibility of the modern citizen and its very antithesis.

Raymond Williams identifies a new and powerful image that contrasts with the urban as a place of bourgeois accomplishment and civilized industry already in late eighteenth century writings about the rapidly expanding London. This is the mob and its dangerous potentials. “The ‘mob’,” writes Williams, “was often violent, unpredictable, capable of being used for reaction” (Williams 1973: 144). In the late eighteenth century, and after a century of industrial mechanization, observers of the city (such as Engels in *The Conditions of the English Working Class*) pointed to the confusion, indifference and atomization that characterized the urban crowd. To be sure, images of the latter as a menacing force persisted. The crowding of cities was thus seen “as a source of social danger: from the loss of customary human feelings to the building of a massive, irrational, explosive force” (Ibid: 217). By the late nineteenth century the city was simply inseparable from the figure of the crowd that always threatened to slide into the urban

rabble and the dangerous mob.<sup>16</sup>

But the crowd, as Caldeira points out, is first and foremost a collection of strangers. It was perhaps Edgar Allan Poe who first captured the experience of walking among strangers in the nascent modern city in “The Man of the Crowd” (1965), a short story originally published in 1840. The story is narrated by a man who, having recovered from a long illness, observes the rush hour London crowd, heterogeneous and dense, through the window of a café. An enigmatic figure exercises upon him a force that he cannot control and draws the man to leave the café and join in with the crowd. He spends hours upon hours wandering aimlessly in the footsteps of the mysterious stranger through the crowded London streets.

Without elaborating on the details of the narrative, I would like to highlight something about Poe’s rendering of the crowd that is important for my discussion here. Poe’s story vividly captures how the strangers who encounter each other “in public”—and here I’m referring to the architectural dimension of public space—inevitably bear marks of status, class, gender, provenance, or region. The strangers in Poe’s crowd display particular “accents” and styles in a way that is reminiscent of the social location of voices in Bakhtin’s heteroglossia of language (Bakhtin 2004). From the bourgeois interior of his London café, his gaze rising above the daily newspaper and through the smoke of his cigar, Poe’s narrator classifies and deciphers the people outside by looking carefully at their clothes, their demeanors and their faces. He also describes other forms of looking, like the fleeting and anxious glances exchanged between strangers in the

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<sup>16</sup> Such concerns had everything to do with the obsessive scholarly preoccupation during that time about the shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*.



crowd: passers-by gaze at each other; ruffians stare at girls; beggars look intently at pedestrians' eyes, as if seeking some consolation. But the narrator's way of looking at the crowd is influenced by the crowd itself, by some force within it. As he becomes gradually possessed by the allure of the crowd and later on by the enigma of the man of the crowd, his mental disposition steadily slides towards delirium.

Poe's narrator seemed to lack what Simmel would later call a particular training of the senses in the modern city, that particular subjectivity that emerges with urban modernity and that would defend itself effectively against such delirium (Simmel 1995). What characterizes the metropolitan man according to Simmel, based on his own experiences in early twentieth century Berlin, is a "blasé attitude", a noticeable indifference to people and things that results from the peculiar conditions of the metropolis. The unprecedented intensification of stimuli in the big city—the complexity and multiplicity of activities, the tempo of life, the fleeting and constant contact with strangers—is confronted by the metropolitan man with intellectualist rather than emotional reactions, a protective psychological response of the mind to these new conditions. This indifference is for Simmel nowhere more perceivable than in the urban crowd: "the bodily closeness and lack of space make intellectual distance really perceivable for the first time" (Simmel 1995: 40).

The urban dweller's sensorial training and "blasé attitude"—the only possibility of living in a world of constant stimulation—suggests that, in contrast to the case of Poe's narrator, the stranger becomes anonymous and unremarkable and ceases to appear as

threatening in the modern city.<sup>17</sup> This is indeed how Richard Sennett reads Simmel's insights in his own reflections on public space: "The notion would be that in the public realm you would always identify yourself in such a way that the anxiety about the other was damped down by giving them clues about who you are" (Sennet 2000: 382).

Whereas Simmel emphasized the gaze as crucially mediating urban interactions, Sennett stresses not only observation but also public performance and self-presentation.<sup>18</sup> The stranger is called upon to enact a determinate, identifiable identity in order to render himself legible to others. But Simmel's point is in fact subtler, for the stranger of the crowd is never fully domesticated and recognizable, and the possibility of disruption always remains. Simmel develops this theme further in his essay "The Stranger" (1971), which I will discuss in some detail in Chapter 2.<sup>19</sup>

Contemporary cities north and south are far larger and denser than the city of Simmel's theorizations, and between early twentieth century Berlin and twenty first century Mexico City there are no doubt stark contrasts. While Simmel, for example insisted that the city provides intense stimulation to all the senses—let us think of the noises, the smells, the touches—he did not theorize the ways in which interaction “in

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<sup>17</sup> This theme is central to Benjamin's writings on the urban crowd. Rather than mysterious and menacing as it appeared in Poe, the crowd becomes for him the very condition of possibility for the modern urban dweller, epitomized by the literary figure of the *flâneur*. Benjamin, W. (1968). On Some Motifs in Baudelaire. *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*. H. Arendt. New York, Schocken Books: 155-200.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin too privileges the eye over other senses in discussing the urban experience. He notes that the eye of the prostitute scrutinizes passers-by while at the same time remaining attentive or on its guard against the police. Benjamin argues that the use of the eye is more central to the city dweller than other senses. He relies on Simmel, who explains this with the introduction of public transport, where people must stare at each other without exchanging a word (Ibid.).

<sup>19</sup> For an interesting take on Simmel's essay on the Stranger see: Siegel, J. T. (2001). "Kiblat" and the Mediatic Jew. *Religion and Media*. H. d. Vries and S. Weber. Stanford, Stanford University Press. 271-303.

public” is mediated by *all* the senses, and not only the eye. The urban crowd is always embodied and sensuous. Consider, for example, Camille. She was a new resident in her late twenties who, after getting married to a man named Daniel and in defiance of her family’s disapproval, moved to the center from one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city. The new couple invested in several food-industry ventures in the renovated center, until they finally settled in one restaurant-bar. These are her reminiscences of her first impressions of the center:

It would drive me crazy, to go out on the street with so many people, and the first times that they harass you and stuff, and to touch... I got a kind of phobia of touching things, during the first few months. I had always been indifferent to dust and things, suddenly I had this thing of washing my hands a hundred times a day, and blowing my nose and showering many times. Terrible (...) And people, and noise, everybody on top of each other, and the smell of the vending stands, and all those things. I was like dazed (Interview with author, December 7, 2006).

The crowd thus appears as a material reality that urban dwellers navigate, decipher and attempt to locate socially. In other words, urban interaction always entails an attempt to locate the other, sometimes with a glimpse, and to place him or her within certain social categories (See also: Goffman 1990). At the same time interaction always carries the possibility that location will fail or, in other words, of the potential for misrecognition. In Chapter 2, for example, I examine a trope of “standing out” that I encountered over and over throughout my fieldwork among new residents. This was a particular apprehension about not blending in and disappearing into an anonymous crowd but being marked, as it were, as an outsider in the historic center. More worryingly from the perspective of new residents, it meant that they were visible as “rich”, and thus became vulnerable to social resentment and even attack. But such anxiety over “standing out” was inseparable from an anxiety about the elusive social identities of other dwellers

of the historic center and the new residents' inability to (properly) locate them.

Throughout the dissertation I thus explore how new residents' desire for urban cosmopolitanism is inseparable from their ambivalent desire of the crowd. But what is "the crowd" in the historic center? My inquiry reveals several different incarnations of the figure of the crowd and, moreover, exposes slippages between these incarnations. First of all, with the crowd I refer to the undifferentiated masses of people that, on any given day, jostle their way through the streets of the historic center, the legions of people coming together "in public," a dense and amorphous mass. This first incarnation of the crowd is well illustrated by Carlos Monsiváis' suggestive opening image in *Los rituales del caos* (The Rituals of Chaos), a chronicle of mass culture in Mexico City: "In the visual terrain," writes Monsiváis, "Mexico City is, above all, an overabundance of people" (Monsiváis 1995).

The crowd is also a number of different publics (Warner 2002), from the spectators of mass concerts in the Zócalo to the consumers of art events. And it is equally the organized masses of political demonstrators that continuously "take over" the historic center's streets and squares. At the same time the undifferentiated mass of the center constantly slides into a different form of the crowd, that is, the scores of vendors and consumers of the center's "informal" economy. Here the crowd begins to bear the connotations of the masses of the urban poor, the "dangerous classes," which are also represented by the figure of the *vecindad* and its inhabitants.

I will attend throughout the pages that follow to how the figure of the crowd emerges in quotidian interactions, in the stories that people tell about these interactions and in the anxieties that they express. What interest me are the slippages between

different social categories: between the “neighbor” and the “criminal,” the “citizen” and the “client,” the “mestizo” and the “Indian,” or between an innocuous stranger and a dangerous one. These are all also slippages of the figure of the crowd: an undifferentiated mass slips into a menacing mob, a potential public into a bunch of clients. I argue that what gets destabilized in these slippages is a certain temporal orientation toward or investment in a cosmopolitan present. It is a temporality that also imbues a particular notion of citizenship, especially inasmuch as the latter is experienced as the opposite of the client.

### **The Citizen, the Mass, the Criminal**

One important concern of this dissertation has been to trace the links between this simultaneous fascination with and suspicion toward the urban crowd on the one hand and new residents’ affective investments in (particular forms of) citizenship and legality on the other. For, as I mentioned above, I approach the rescue and the imaginaries of urban cosmopolitanism that it mobilizes as inscribed within a changing landscape of governance and ideological commitments across the world. With the conclusion of the cold war and the global triumph of capitalism and the “free market,” scholars have charted across this landscape a great number of “dismantlements:” from the end of mass utopias and of collective forms of political belonging (Buck-Morss 2000) to the disavowal of class as a meaningful social and political category that organizes interaction and experience (Zizek 1989), or from the reconfiguration of state/society relations and the concomitant spread of neoliberal forms governance (Mitchell 1991; Rose, Barry et al. 1996; Trouillot 2001) to the rise of civil society as a new panacea that stands in lieu of

other forms of social and political belonging (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001).

What interests me in these disparate yet interrelated developments is a discursive activation of a particular figure of “the citizen” and the concomitant emergence of a counter figure of sorts, namely, “the criminal.” Influenced by the late Foucault and writing about a very different context (the “advanced liberalism” of Europe and the United States), Nikolas Rose has described these emergent figures and their relation to novel forms and rationalities of governance over the past several decades.<sup>20</sup> According to Rose, in the wake of “social liberalism” and the twentieth century welfare-state demands for citizenship rights have become inseparably linked with projects to reform individuals at the levels of their personal skills, competencies and conducts. The idea is that, as they become proper, responsible citizens, individuals will be able to thrive without state interference (Rose, Barry et al. 1996). Particular forms of governance, argues Rose, depend upon specific regimes of intelligibility and enunciation, which are in turn always traversed by conflicts over who can speak, from what place and according to what criteria of truth and authority (Rose 1999). The question that arises, then, is what commitments do contemporary idioms of citizenship make possible and for whom? Around which networks and circuits do these idioms circulate? What passions and affects do they mobilize? How, and to whom, do these idioms become intelligible and meaningful in the Mexican context?

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<sup>20</sup> Rose argues that specific policy shifts, for example Thatcher’s reforms in 1980s England, were not realizations of particular philosophies, but rather practical *ad hoc* responses to specific problems. Certain rationality emerged in the process that provided a linkage between these different responses until they appeared to be part of a coherent logic. For Rose, then, neoliberalism designate less an epoch than a rationality of particular styles of government and “the instruments, techniques and practices to which they become linked.” Rose, N. S. (1999). Powers of freedom: reframing political thought. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY, Cambridge University Press.

I find Claudio Lomnitz's reflections on the history and politics of citizenship in Mexico helpful for thinking about new residents' affective commitment to (particular idioms of) citizenship in the historic center. In "Modes of Mexican Citizenship" (2001) Lomnitz explores the cultural dynamics of citizenship in Mexico while tracing the transformations of its definition and political significance since the early nineteenth century. He argues that the experience and practice of citizenship in a context of non-universal access to rights and services have depended upon the mobilization of personal relations and informal (i.e., non institutional) arrangements. The bureaucrat therefore emerges as a sort of powerful gatekeeper. But Lomnitz insists that the social terrain where personal negotiations and arrangements take place is not neutral or immutable. It is always shaped by people's theoretical relationship to particular rights, that is, by the very definition of who can claim the position of the citizen, a definition which, it goes without saying, has varied historically (p. 60-61).

As was the case elsewhere at the time, in nineteenth century post-independence Mexico the definition of who could claim the position of the citizen was entangled with elite anxieties about the crowd, especially as incarnated in that most elusive of modern concepts, "the people." An intrinsically ambivalent concept, "the people" is both the site of popular sovereignty, the foundation of the state, and that which threatens the very order established in its name (the dangerous crowd) (Ranciere 2001). The Spanish translation, *el pueblo*, has similarly dual connotations. But while the English term has a certain class inflection (i.e., the common people), it also refers to the nation and the citizenry, as in "we the people." *El pueblo*, on the other hand, has never been entirely isomorphic with the citizenry, as its class and racial inflections have always been more

salient. (Consider, for example, a group of Indigenous protesters in Chiapas appealing to the soldiers summoned to subdue them: “*ustedes también son pueblo*” (you are also part of the *pueblo*).<sup>21</sup> *El pueblo*, then, has a more distinct sociological content and thus a clearer resemblance to the potentially dangerous mob.

Allow me to briefly sketch Lomnitz’s discussion of the politics of Mexican citizenship and of the position of *el pueblo* in order to historically situate the contemporary transformation of this figure. Elite representations of *el pueblo* (*la chusma*, *el populacho*, *la canalla*, *la plebe*) in nineteenth century post-Independence Mexico oscillated between, on the one hand, images of a “good *pueblo*,” which referred to the lower classes that, despite their abject status, were non-threatening and in need of state protection (a sort of proto-citizen), and on the other hand a “bad *pueblo*,” a criminal, violent and irredeemable force that included both the urban rabble and rebellious Indians at the frontiers of the young republic. As the central state consolidated itself towards the end of the nineteenth century (and particularly under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz) the ideological emphasis shifted from the problem of the expansion of citizenship to the challenges of modernization and progress as preferred ways of consolidating the country’s stability and international standing. The bad or dangerous pueblo was neutralized as the “abject pueblo” and effectively excluded from the national project (p. 73).

After the revolution of 1910 the pueblo again came to occupy central stage, though now in the protagonist role of the quintessential Mexican, a reversal that I will discuss in

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<sup>21</sup> This formulation is taken from an image that circulated extensively during the first months of the Indigenous Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, in 1994. However, it is a recurrent image during confrontations between protesters and the police or the military.



some detail in Chapter 3. The post-revolutionary state incorporated the revolutionary masses in the form of corporations—or what Lomnitz has called a massified form of citizenship—that nonetheless accorded several social rights and protections (for example the right to education, the right to land for peasants, or the right to a minimum wage). In this regard, the *pueblo* was neutralized not (or not primarily) through relations of hierarchical dependency with the elites, but most crucially through an inclusive corporatism that saw its incorporation into the state as the ultimate patron and as the quintessential modernizing agent. In the narrative of the post-revolutionary state the *pueblo* would be transformed into a full-fledged modern citizenry, but anxieties over the dangerous *pueblo*, now invested with revolutionary potentials, remained.

To be sure, the *pueblo* did not remain unchanged over the seventy years of the post-revolutionary regime. My interest in presenting this abridged history, however, is to situate a shift in its fate over the past thirty years, in the context of Mexico's "democratization" and the gradual dismantlement of the post-revolutionary state as well as in the context of larger transformations across the world. Within what I will call a liberal democratic narrative, Mexico's transition has been construed as a slow awakening of individual citizens (especially epitomized by the figure of civil society), which contrast with the massified citizens of the old regime (I discuss this topic at length in Chapters 4 and 6).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the discourse of the "bad *pueblo*" has regained traction in this context, and as insecurity and the informal economy have increased and mass protests have appeared less clearly controlled or controllable. As could be expected, this re-emergence of the dangerous *pueblo* has been accompanied with its re-criminalization,

a way of policing class boundaries at a moment in which class mobility and a utopian revolutionary future have become foreclosed. In this too Mexico's developments have been entangled with global processes, namely, the increasing criminalization of populations that have become residual within present economic and political landscapes (Wacquant 2001). In Chapter 3 I explore how in Mexico such criminalization has also referenced the racialized figure of the Indian and with it, the possibility of exclusion and incommensurability. I argue that the cosmopolitan class position is predicated upon and the same time undone by this possibility. I will also approach this topic through the analysis of particular idioms of legality and the concomitant criminalization of informal street workers in Chapter 6.

The twentieth century revolution was for a long time a national obsession. It gave rise to a copious historiography and to a wide variety of interpretations, from popular revolt to bourgeois revolution, from national event to scattered upheavals, from radical break to a continuation of the old regime (See: Joseph and Nugent 1994). For decades "The Revolution", a more or less official, more or less unified rendering of this event (which, it goes without saying, has changed over the years), provided legitimacy to the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) that emerged in its wake and that governed the country for seventy-one years. The revolution's salience in the political rhetoric of the regime, however, began to wane in the early 1980s. The government began to favor other idioms of "modernization" such as "transparency", "efficiency" and "democratization" (Escalante Gonzalbo 2006). In turn, over the past few decades a wide range of public intellectuals, and political commentators from a variety of political positions have construed the revolution as isomorphic with the PRI, and hence with corruption and

authoritarianism. In these by now dominant interpretations there is nothing to be salvaged from the “event” itself or from the regime that stemmed from it.

Without for a minute disavowing the corruption, repression and violence that were central to the post-revolutionary state (in its different incarnations) throughout the twentieth century, the point I want to make is that the post-revolutionary rhetoric (which was no doubt stronger at certain moments and weaker at others) was effectively rendered legible and meaningful within the context of larger social and political horizons in the twentieth century. In other words, there was an ideological *and* an institutional dimension of the revolution that was firmly inscribed within twentieth century politics worldwide: the image of a strong state and the promise of universal prosperity and the future incorporation of the masses. It is within the global shift away from this form of politics that I locate the fate of the masses in contemporary Mexico.

In this context, citizenship, or better yet the lack of citizens, has become an obsession for Mexico’s liberal intellectual elites.<sup>22</sup> Commenting on this obsession Fernando Escalante has written:

The model is usually the United States or France, but the idea we have of the citizen doesn’t really correspond to any concrete reality: it is an imaginary creation with chimerical attributes. The citizen is responsible, tolerant, honest, truthful, attentive to public interest, respectful of authority; he can be critical when necessary but also unselfish and obedient; a liberal individualist like no other who shows solidarity to an heroic extent; rational and reasonable, capable of sacrificing his personal interest. And he always abides by the law, regardless of how demanding and awkward the law might be. In other words—let us be serious—we should not be surprised that there are no citizens. In Mexico or anywhere. And nonetheless it is very difficult to renounce to this fantasy, even to see it as a fantasy (Escalante Gonzalbo 2010).

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<sup>22</sup> With this term I refer to a wide spectrum of political commentators, public intellectuals, academics and “pundits” from different political positions who regularly write in national newspapers and appear in television and radio talk shows on a daily basis.

As I mentioned before, this idealized, impossible citizen has as its opposites allegedly outmoded forms of political participation and belonging such as clientelism, corporatism and populism—all remnants of the ancient regime and all especially epitomized by the urban masses. Citizenship, then, appears in this ideological configuration as a title only a select few can hold and thus as a status marker, the converse of which appears as that object of desire and of horror that the masses incarnate for the cosmopolitan urbanite.

How, then, do (neo) liberal idioms of citizenship become legible and meaningful in this context? They are instilled, for example, through government poverty alleviation programs that assert co-responsibility. They are found in the ways in which people talk about the vices of a paternalistic state that creates a lazy population (Cahn 2008). In the historic center, these idioms appear in discussions about whether workshops for the local “community” should be free; or in pleas to respect the law or to file police reports when witnessing transgressions. Indeed, the citizen has been construed as the main protagonist of rescue. Take, for example, the public declarations of an executive of the Foundation:

Citizens have the most important role, because this is an endeavor for everyone, because the particularity of this rescue is that it is the first focusing on people. Before the priority was to fix the buildings, but they remained empty, and after a few years they started to deteriorate again. When things have life, they are well kept. If you live in your house, you make sure that everything is in order. That’s why we are very focused on people, first of all, on those who are already here, so they will have better living conditions, and secondly, bringing more people to live in those buildings, to work in them (**Centro Histórico Guía para Caminantes, #1, 2002**).

At the same time, and to draw again on Lomnitz’s argument about the quotidian negotiation of citizenship, these idioms are embedded in a context in which personal negotiation and informal arrangements remain indispensable, and where citizenship is, as

it were, negotiated on the ground. They circulate in a setting in which, far from clear-cut (as certain liberal democrats would want to believe), the distinction between the citizen and the client is rather illegible, a topic that I will discuss in detail in Chapter 4.

Elite anxieties over the lack of “citizens” in Mexico, such as the ones I mentioned before, gained spectacular expression during the presidential election of 2006 and the mass protests that followed. These events had a significant impact on the rescue, on the forms of sociability that I was studying and on my own ways of looking at them. AMLO, the former mayor of Mexico City and the man who initiated the rescue was at the center of these events. At once a widely popular and reviled figure, AMLO had resigned from his position in early 2005 in order to prepare his presidential bid as the candidate of a center left coalition. At that point he was tipped as a favorite among all possible candidates. His tenure as mayor was highly contentious: from his open and reciprocated antagonism with president Fox, to his controversial social programs or the extensively publicized corruption scandals involving some of his closest associates. He was deemed a populist and offended the sensibilities of the (neo) liberal orthodoxy in the country. His social spending and his emphasis on “the poor” were represented as a residue, an atavism and a change of course—back to the past—for a country that had finally started to march forward.

After the election took place on July 2, 2006 AMLO contested its unfavorable results, claiming that a fraud had been committed. He summoned a series of mass protests and mobilizations in the historic center that culminated in a sit-in (*plantón*), which disputed not only the center but also the entire city for more almost two months. Like AMLO, his masses were represented not only as atavistic but potentially as dangerous

and antidemocratic. Newspaper articles, blogs, and TV programs ferociously criticized his protests. Denunciations of anti-democracy, of deliberately shattering the advancements of the country and of sabotaging its institutions dovetailed blogs that decried the takeover of public space by the gullible masses. AMLO's masses thus constantly slipped into the old trope of the dangerous *pueblo*, the criminal class, or the dangerous mob.

The initial momentum of the rescue had started to subside in late 2005, but for new residents the post election mass-protests spelled a new and crucial moment of decline, as I will discuss in Chapter 6. "How can [AMLO] now turn against his own project," a new resident perplexedly (but rhetorically) asked me during the protests. By late 2006, new residents' disillusionment with the rescue seemed to have become endemic. Some artists felt that the Foundation had deceived them, since promises to create a culturally vibrant quarter in the southwest of the historic center through support for the arts and through the opening of galleries and other cultural spaces had not fully materialized. Moreover, security was again deteriorating. The perception was that things had gotten better only to get bad yet again: from a renovated pedestrian square deteriorating again into a state of disrepair, or street vendors returning to areas that had already been recuperated, to robberies occurring once more in the affluent financial corridor or rising tensions between old and new residents in the center's southwest, as I will discuss throughout the dissertation.

### **Ethnographic Context, Fieldwork and Ethical Dilemmas**

The seeds of this study were planted in the in the summer of 2004, when I traveled

to the southern state of Oaxaca to conduct preliminary fieldwork for what at the time I thought would be my dissertation project. I stopped in Mexico City for a few days to visit friends on my way there when two developments attracted my attention and made me doubt my prior research plans. First, on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2004, a few days before my arrival, a massive demonstration against insecurity took place in the city. Hundreds of thousands of people marched down Reforma Avenue to demand more effective measures against crime, and especially against kidnapping. As opposed to most protest marches, which are routinely denounced on television and many newspapers as a nuisance, this demonstration was presented as a citizens' march or as civil society voicing its discontent and was actively endorsed and promoted by the main TV and radio stations in the country. A great number of people belonging to the middle and upper classes who had perhaps never participated in public protests took to the streets that day, chanting slogans such as "death penalty to kidnappers".

Second, Mexico City's congress had recently approved a controversial law known as the Civic Culture Act. Based on the recommendations of New York City's former mayor Rudolph Giuliani about how best to fight crime and insecurity in the city, the law criminalized several "informal" activities in the city's streets, such as vending or windshield cleaning. As the act would go into effect the following month (August 1<sup>st</sup>) it was receiving heightened coverage in the press during my visit. Many of my friends, too, were obsessively talking about it. While some denounced the Act as "repressive" others complained about the excessive presence of street vendors on the sidewalks and the lack of a culture of legality in the city.

What intrigued me in these two interrelated developments was a hardening of the

discourse on crime and illegality and the construal of the demonstration as an initiative of citizens. It was clear that insecurity had become unbearable for broad segments of the population and that many wanted “*mano dura*” (a firm hand). But there was also an implicit dimension of class and race to these discourses that was disavowed under the rubric of “the citizen”. A dual picture of society seemed to emerge from them: on the one hand, the masses of the urban poor, now criminalized by new legislation, and on the other hand a sanitized version of civil society demanding tough penalties on criminals.

I decided to spend some time in Mexico City in order to explore the possibility of developing a research project there after spending several weeks in Oaxaca conducting preliminary research with bureaucrats and lawyers defending indigenous prisoners. A few days after my return to the city I met a good friend who worked at a private university in the historic center. Until that day I was only vaguely aware that a plan to revitalize this area was underway and that Carlos Slim had been involved in it. My friend, who had been conducting research on cultural policies in the city, filled me in on the rescue, and especially on the art and cultural scene emerging in the southwest of the center. She mentioned a guided tour of the “security program” that she had attended the previous week. I was fascinated.

I spent three weeks visiting the center every day, talking to people, taking note of my friends’ impressions of the rescue, learning more about Slim’s involvement, collecting media representations, and visiting the police command center. What was going on in the historic center seemed to me to reflect the earlier developments that caught my attention: an obsession with crime, the introduction of tough policing, new forms of criminalization, and a heightened sense of class tension. At the same time it



complicated them, for the people who were moving to the historic center were artists, intellectuals, and students who wanted an intense and vibrant urban experience that included living in a dense and socially mixed space. Moreover, the majority of these residents would surely oppose such harsh measures as the death penalty and would likely align themselves to the left of the political spectrum. I returned to New York determined to make the rescue, and especially the experiences of those who were moving there, the focus of my dissertation.

I designed my project and my fieldwork methodology to capture the urban experiences and contradictions of new residents in the historic center by looking at the interface between rescue and security in their daily routines and interactions. My work thus also encompassed an institutional dimension, with a particular focus on the police and on the Foundation. My research with new residents took place in the two areas of the historic center where Slim's real estate company had remodeled buildings for residential use, the more affluent and monumental "financial corridor" and the more dilapidated "cultural corridor".

When I arrived in the field in January 2006 the first phase of the rescue had already been completed (2002-2006). The historically affluent heart of the historic center known as the "financial corridor", composed of approximately thirty-five blocks between the Alameda Park to the west and the Zócalo to the north, had been entirely renovated. The pavement on the streets had been substituted with cobblestones; all sorts of wiring that formerly hung from sidewalk poles had been re-installed underground; sidewalks had been widened and their surfaces remade; all the facades had been cleaned and re-painted. The Foundation as well as other private investors had restored several buildings for

residential use, targeting young professionals like Armando and Camille. Trendy brand-name clothing stores had opened, as well as restaurants and bars catering to a young affluent clientele of newcomers, but such venues remained relatively inconspicuous. Far more eye-catching was the heightened police presence in this area. Besides officers belonging to the newly created Citizen's Protection Unit who were walking in pairs on every block, there were surveillance cameras on almost every street corner in this area.

There were almost no street vendors there during my fieldwork, excepting the occasional food sellers who would station themselves at rush hour and who were frequently removed by the police. Even before the rescue the presence of street vendors in the financial corridor was relatively meager when compared with the street markets behind the National Palace and the Cathedral. But now they had been removed altogether and positioned themselves a few blocks west of this area, on the edges of the rescued zone. The fact that they kept returning as *toreros*<sup>23</sup>—placing their products on red carpets that could easily be removed when the police approached—was a constant source of anxiety for new residents. My entry point in the financial corridor was a tenant's association created by newly settled residents in order to get to know each other and to address their common concerns, from insecurity or traffic to the presence of street vendors, noise and garbage. Through this association I established contact with several new residents in this area, mostly affluent young professionals.

Slim's company had also acquired several buildings in the less monumental and more neglected area south of the financial corridor, which the rescue plan designated as a

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<sup>23</sup> Meaning *matadors* or bullfighters, the term refers both to the red clothes that vendors use to place their products and to the fact that they look like bullfighters as they offer their products to passersby.

“cultural corridor” where the settlement of artists and the proliferation of galleries and cultural spaces would be promoted. Here every street specialized in a different commodity market: musical instrument shops on one street; electronics stores in the next; computers and software stores in another. Street vendors clustered at certain intersections, their merchandise coinciding with what was offered inside the stores. Further south, a few blocks with numerous *vecindades* seemed to stand apart from the hustle and bustle that surrounded them.

Early divergences between Foundation executives and government officials impeded plans to renovate this area. But the Foundation nevertheless went ahead with the restoration of several buildings, provided support for arts and culture, and also financed a visible policing operation in the area. At the time of my fieldwork in addition to renting commercial spaces bars and cafes as well as to galleries and other art venues, the Foundation had renovated approximately ten apartment buildings for housing, offering apartments at below-market prices to artists and people belonging to Mexico City’s art scene, such as Pedro and Monica.

Shortly before my arrival the Foundation opened Culture Space, the cultural center that I mentioned in my opening scene, on a street named Regina, which became the central axis of the “cultural corridor” and the focus of my fieldwork in this area. Most people working there were artists or cultural promoters who also lived in renovated buildings owned by Slim’s company in the area. This cultural center thus became a fertile entry point into the social networks and personal lives of new residents, their activities and their routines. I eventually narrowed my focus on one residential building near Culture Space. As the first renovated building on the street, its residents seemed to have

experienced particular tensions and violent encounters with older inhabitants of the block.

Like most new residents, I moved constantly between the financial corridor and the cultural corridor during my fieldwork. My daily activities consisted in attending art openings and events, frequenting social gatherings and meetings at local bars and cafes or at peoples' homes, documenting public art projects, and going to neighborhood assemblies and to meetings of the residents association. I collected the life and residential histories of new residents and documented their interactions with other inhabitants of the center, from tenement dwellers to street vendors, as well as with Foundation executives, security authorities and the police.

In addition to working with new residents, I conducted interviews with several earlier inhabitants of Regina Street and its surroundings, with many of whom I established close relations. However, I did not conduct long-term ethnographic research in the *vecindades* there. This reflected my research priorities. I was interested in the experiences, perspectives, fears and anxieties of new residents and in their own figurations and imaginations of other dwellers of the area. While I considered it crucial to hear and document the perspective of other inhabitants, I did not make these the focus of my ethnographic inquiries.

As for the densely populated and more traditional neighborhoods east and north of the Zócalo, which did not benefit from the rescue during its first phase, they only appear in this dissertation as imagined by new residents, many of whom referred to these areas, mostly unknown to them, as "Calcutta" (See Figure 2). Take for example's Camille's comments about the separation between the rescued center and the rest of the historic center:

[The] center that exists in our imagination is this center. What's there behind the National Palace, well, it is Calcutta. It's different. And also around Independencia, that's where electricians live and where one shops around. But it is not the center. Those are the barriers that everyone has, aren't they? The center is the touristy, pretty, nice part. That is the nice center, and all the rest of the center is like a thing of the third world, in which no one from here is involved. I mean, our priorities are this part of the center. Maybe it is because we cannot comprehend the other part of the center. It isn't—it has never been—part of our experience. And it is not something we can understand (Interview with author, December 7, 2006).

Parallel to these fieldwork activities I conducted ethnographic research at the police command center, the office that coordinates the entire security program in the historic center. During preliminary research in the summer of 2005 I befriended Bety, a smart and funny mid-level bureaucrat at this institution in her late 20s. Bety generously explained to me the (public) details of the security program, answered my questions and promised to support me upon my return. But it was clear to me that conducting participant observation research at this secretive institution would necessitate a special authorization from “above,” which I arranged upon my return to the field with the help of a close friend who worked at the local government

The “boss,” as the civilian director of the security program was known among his subordinates, welcomed me with a mixture of interest, suspicion and indifference. He more or less left it me to negotiate my access to the different departments under his command: the monitoring center, charged with watching the surveillance cameras and responding to emergency calls, the statistics department or the customer service office. This was a mixed blessing. It granted me room for maneuver and a certain freedom of movement within the command center, but it also conditioned my research upon the whims of department heads. For example, the officer in charge of the monitoring center,

a retired army captain whom others described as a bitter man, aggressively guarded the secrecy of his work (and clearly feared that I was there to evaluate him) and granted me only very limited access to his dominion.

I spent most of these four months observing the daily work at the command center and chatting with its bureaucrats, who seemed always eager to share their concerns and frustrations. I explored the production of statistics about crime in the area; the “monitoring” of the center’s daily life and the management of disruptive events such as demonstrations; the dissemination of information about security to the general public through the customer service office; and the organization of community meetings with new residents. On several occasions I accompanied managerial executives on their daily walks through the streets of the center. This was the closest I got to actual police officers on the ground.

Albeit in a very different way, my research with new residents also required a constant negotiation of my role as an anthropologist. They often seemed to have forgotten (or repressed) the fact that I was studying “them.” Ever since the reflexive turn that engulfed the discipline of anthropology in the 1980s, anthropologists have been carefully aware of the conundrums of representation and voicing in ethnographic work (Marcus, Clifford et al. 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986). The emphasis on the remote and the exotic, on the radical other, as the proper object of anthropological inquiry has been relativized in the wake of the discipline’s process of self-critique, and more and more anthropologists conduct fieldwork “at home” (Peirano 1998). And yet making the familiar strange and the strange familiar remains not only a defining quality but also a most compelling feature of the discipline, one which in turn poses specific

methodological and ethical conundrums for those studying their own societies.

Mexico features a long and well-established anthropological tradition, which has been inextricably bound with national (and nationalist) concerns. Its privileged object of study has traditionally been “the Indian,” that ambivalent figure who is at once the foundation of the nation and the foreign (I will develop this argument in Chapter 3). Urban anthropology, when it has not dealt with indigenous populations in the city, has for the most part focused on migrants from the interior, on the urban poor and on other disadvantaged populations. Anthropology, then, is a recognizable field for the general educated public, including the historic center’s new residents. But the latter do not expect the anthropologist to study people like themselves.

For this reason, and especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, my presence and my inquiries were sometimes met with discomfort. But another aspect of my presence there weighed more heavily upon both my fieldwork and the writing process. In a way I belonged to the social networks of the people I was studying, and especially to the artists and intellectuals living in the southwest of the center. I formed part of these milieus also in terms of my social position. I once wrote in my diary that at times I felt as if I were doing an ethnography of myself.

At the same time I was also an outsider. The many years I have spent abroad have left their marks on my sensibility to forms of sociability in Mexico City, and particularly to its accentuated class hierarchies. It is precisely my own position as insider/outsider that drew me to this project—my own embeddedness in the very same contradictions that I observed in my “informants.” My social proximity to the people I was studying demanded my constant attention, my relentless estrangement of daily things that could

seem all too familiar. I had to repeatedly remind my “subjects” that I was an anthropologist interested in their experiences in the historic center, not (or not only) a friend.

The same conundrum took on a different form as I embarked upon the process of writing. How was I to explain social phenomena in which I am implicated? How was I to write about the aspirations, fears, anxieties and contradictions of my subjects, many of which could have just as well been my own, without making them appear too exotic? Would the people I was writing about recognize themselves in my descriptions? Was I being fair in my rendering of their experiences? I have aimed to capture the complexities of people whose lives are “informed and constrained by the hierarchies in which they find themselves embedded” (Goldstein 2003: 5). I hope my attention to ethnographic detail and to the complexities of everyday interactions has done justice to the predicaments of the historic center’s new residents.

### **Mapping the Chapters**

In this introduction I have attempted to map out the main themes of this dissertation and the theoretical commitments that have motivated it. As I have explained, its ethnographic focus consists in moments of encounter that slide into suspicion, uncertainty, instability and misrecognition. The dissertation traces a desire for commonality, for an “all of us” in the historic center (a recognition as urban dwellers or as fellow citizens), and the perpetual doubt about the possibility of this commonality. The interactions that I will explore below, I argue, are informed by a long history of elite anxieties about the masses, by a long dialectic of their incorporation and exclusion in the



national project, and, crucially, by the imagination of a temporal and spatial “elsewhere” against which the “here and now” is to be measured.

The second chapter, titled “Standing Out” traces the contradictions that face artists and cultural promoters living and working in the cultural corridor. Discussing different interactions between new residents and the people whom their cultural projects aim to incorporate, I trace how the form of sociability of the neighbor, someone whom one can recognize or whom one can love as oneself, slides into different social figure, namely, a resentful and menacing other.

“Racial Imaginaries and (Neo) Liberal Sensibilities”, the third chapter, situates this core contradiction historically, providing a brief introduction to the history of racial imaginaries in Mexico and to their inseparability from a certain temporal imagination. I show how the figure of the Indian is at once projected to an outside, an incommensurable other holding back a progressive, forward looking nation, while at the same time it traverses social relations between *mestizos*.

The fourth and fifth chapters take the discussion to the terrain of contemporary idioms of citizenship and new residents’ affective investment in these idioms. Titled “Clients of Slim” the fourth chapter explores how new residents navigate their position as citizens partaking of a national public project of rescue and as clients of Carlos Slim. Exploring their ambiguity vis-à-vis what they view as residues averting their contemporaneity with an imagined cosmopolitan present, namely a daily reality of illegal street vending, a labyrinthine bureaucracy and corporatist politics, I argue that while invested in a particular form of citizenship these new residents *also* remain fully embedded in the patron-client relation that they disavow.

In the fifth chapter, “The Rescue of Law,” I explore the expectations, hopes and desires that new residents place upon the rescue of law in the historic center, the promises that it holds for them and the threats that it poses to them. I analyze how locally situated understandings of law and legality intersect with broadly circulating discourses about “the rule of law” (*el estado de derecho*) and explore how the figure of the police appears as crucial for guaranteeing the rescue while at the same time locating new residents in the here and now.

Finally, the last concluding chapter explores the mass post-election protests that took place in the summer of 2006 and paralyzed the historic center and the entire city for weeks. Looking at how new residents experienced these protests as residents of the historic center and as concerned citizens of the country I tie together the quotidian anxieties triggered by the urban masses in the center with broader concerns about political instability and social belonging in Mexico.

## Chapter 2: Standing Out

### Introduction

#### **Urgent Notice**

To our neighbors and visitors,  
to all users in general:

As you all know, the new pedestrian square  
was made with much effort for the enjoyment  
of all of us.

To keep it clean is to respect the community and this institution.

**Don't litter and don't make this area dirty intentionally.**

If you catch anyone damaging this  
public space report it to Culture Space's security.

THANK YOU

In February 2007 I encountered several copies of this notice hung next to each other in a formerly dark and derelict *callejón* (narrow street) at the southwestern edges of Mexico City's historic center. Less than a year before, and under the sponsorship of Carlos Slim's Foundation, this space had been transformed into a pedestrian square. With paving stones and brand-new street lamps the *callejón* now served as an extension of Culture Space, the cultural center also sponsored by the Foundation. It was near lunchtime when I arrived, and some kids returning from school were congregating in the square. A boy who appeared to be around ten years of age was boasting about his new remote control car while others tried to convince him to let them give it a try. Pedro the

poet and cultural promoter whom we met in the Introduction, was sitting alone at his bar located on the ground floor of the cultural center, at the corner with Regina Street. He was nervously glancing at the pieces of paper that displayed the urgent notice and at the people walking up and down the square, some stopping to read the message, others entirely oblivious to it.

When I sat to join him, as I frequently did upon arriving at the bar, Pedro explained that he had written the notice in an attempt to communicate with the neighboring community and to raise awareness about the rapid deterioration of the *callejón*. He was uncertain, however, whether the tone of the notice was appropriate and how it would be received. Already for months Pedro had complained about women and children from nearby *vecindades* throwing trash in the *callejón*, which he took as evidence of their disrespect for the newly renovated space and attributed to poor education and little civic awareness. Lately, however, he had mentioned more worrying occurrences, most notably teenagers painting graffiti on the doors and walls of the cultural center and intentionally urinating at its entrance after dark, which he saw as an alarming indication of growing hostility against the space and its staff from the local community.

Pedro's notice was an amicable invitation to a community of users—"all of us," neighbors and visitors—for whom the *callejón* had been renovated, requesting proper use of a common, public space. It asked everyone to partake in its preservation by practicing basic civic values, such as not littering or calling the police to report transgressions and damages to public property. Despite its amicable tone, however, the notice was fraught with anxiety and threat. It expressed Pedro's growing concern over the square's regression to a deteriorated, polluted and dangerous state, which supposedly had been

surmounted through physical renovation and through the new life that art had infused on it. The notice also hinted at the elusive nature of the menace and threatened with the force of law. In doing so, it destabilized the “all of us” to whom it was addressed and captured a move all too common for people like Pedro: a constant oscillation between proximity and distance with the lower class inhabitants of the historic center, an oscillation traversed by misrecognition.

The notice partook of a pedagogical discourse underpinning the rescue, namely, to inculcate civility and respect for public space among the historic center’s inhabitants. While echoing longstanding tropes of modernization the notice’s pedagogical message also expressed contemporary concerns about individuals taking responsibility for their own actions. At the same time, it expressed doubt about the viability of the rescue’s pedagogical mission. In other words, the notice was an inclusive and welcoming address, referring to an open space renovated for the enjoyment of all, where darkness had been replaced with light and where kids played and artists experimented. And yet, its civility was punctured by anxiety. It gestured towards commonality and recognition between “all of us” while at the same time raising doubts about the very possibility of this commonality.

This chapter examines the predicaments of people like Pedro, young, emerging artists living and working in the southwestern edges of the historic center. Through a detailed analysis of their perceptions and experiences of the area and their interactions with the center’s old inhabitants, and tracing how these perceptions and interactions changed over the course of my fieldwork, I explore how new residents navigate their own ambiguous location within the discourses and practices of rescue. Focusing on encounters

where recognition slides into threat, I argue that a double sense of misrecognition transpires in everyday interactions on the street, at the corner store or at the cultural center. On the one hand, new residents seem unable to properly locate the old inhabitants of the area, who slip from the position of neighbors—people with whom they aim to engage in new forms of sociability—to the position of menacing others, a dangerous and ultimately irredeemable group. On the other hand, those very same artists fear being mistaken as affluent or as too close to Carlos Slim, and thereby becoming targets of crime and class resentment.

### **A “Rich and Intense Lifestyle” in the Historic Center**

Culture Space was part of a plan to transform a run-down area in the southwestern edges of the historic center into a hub for artists, where they could find spaces to live, work and exhibit. The executive committee of the rescue had divided the area to be renovated into several different corridors, each with a distinctive characteristic. Citing the presence of prominent cultural spaces where students, intellectuals and artists convened, this committee designated a section of approximately twenty blocks in the southwest, an area with high rates of criminality as a cultural corridor.<sup>1</sup> But as I mentioned in the

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<sup>1</sup> The cultural corridor was delimited by the Eje Central Lázaro Cárdenas to the west, Mesones street to the north, 5 de Febrero street to the east and Izazaga avenue to the south. The plan to introduce art and culture as tools for the revitalization of the historic center's southwest was first conceived by a group of urban planners, architects and sociologists in the “Partial Program for the Urban Development of the Historic Center,” a document they produced for Mexico City's government in the year 2000. The aim of this Partial Program was to provide an overview of the area's socio-economic profile, to identify its most pressing problems and to offer a general guideline for future urban planning. Accordingly, the Partial Program defined the population of the historic center's southwest as “lower-middle class families”, and identified a trend of growing physical and social decay in the area, evidenced by the poor condition of many of its buildings, the presence of criminal activities and the high levels of pollution. At the same time, it acknowledged a potential for “the rescue of public space” to counter such decline, considering that the area featured three important colonial public plazas as well as a private university that offered cultural administration and art programs to thousands of students. In order to “detonate the reconstruction of the

Introduction, the rescue was not a coherent plan, much less a set of social or cultural policies (such as promoting mixed income housing or multiclass sociability). In fact, after Slim had acquired and renovated several buildings in this area, some for residential and others for commercial use, the local administration decided not to expand the physical renovation of streets and facades to the center's southwest. The public/private collaboration continued, especially in regards to extending the security apparatus to this area, or to granting substantial tax breaks to Slim and other private entrepreneurs. But the creation of a cultural corridor was left in the hands of the Foundation alone and, very importantly, to their own resources and priorities. As we shall see, this absence of state policies (and of programs softening the impact of rescue) had important repercussions on the local sociability of the center's southwest and on the conflicts and tensions that ensued there.

The task of creating a cultural corridor fell on a young relative of Mr. Slim, an enthusiastic man in his late twenties trained as both engineer and art historian. Towards the end of 2003 he began working on creating the conditions for attracting creators, art students, cultural promoters and young professionals to live and work in this area. According to the Foundation's website, the goal was to "create a rich and intense lifestyle" in the historic center. This is how this executive described his vision in an interview conducted in March 2006:

All the elements were here in the cultural corridor. (...) The buildings were there,

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neighborhood's social fabric" the document proposed the creation of a "cultural corridor" along the axis created by the three plazas, which would include a comprehensive renovation and the permanent organization of cultural and entertainment activities. (2000). Decreto por el que se aprueba el Programa Parcial de Desarrollo Urbano del Centro Histórico del Programa Delegacional de Desarrollo Urbano para la Delegación Cuauhtemoc. México, D.F., Gaceta Oficial del Distrito Federal. **10**: 184.

the institutions, the spaces. Then I came up with the idea of generating a hub where people or artists or creators could find a place to live, produce, exhibit and sell, and that things could happen in this hub. (...) You have a hotel, you transform this hotel into residencies, these residencies cause people to come live here, and because they live here, they come into contact with each other, and because they come into contact, they generate new projects, and the Historic Center Foundation welcomes these new projects and gives them an outlet. So it is magnificent, because the musician guy who wants a place to play comes downstairs and meets with the guy in the lobby, and it turns out that the lobby guy presents videos, and so on Friday the musician is going to play with some video projections (Interview with author March 14, 2006).

Overlooking the complicated economic and social conditions that prevailed in this area, and especially the fact that a lot of people already lived there, this executive recruited creators, promoters and other people involved in Mexico City's arts and culture scenes to conceive and implement art projects. Bernardo, a self-described performance artist in his early thirties proved to be ideal for this task. He was very familiar with the historic center. During the early nineties he had attended a liberal arts university in the vicinity and had been actively involved in a series of independent art projects in the center through which he had become interested in performance. He enjoyed cultivating an image of transgression. I often heard him tell stories about his youthful wanderings in the toughest corners of the center, expressing a fascination for its aesthetic of decay and what he called its bizarre characters and sordid places, where he claimed to have found constant inspiration for his performances.

Bernardo had built a good reputation as a producer of cultural events as well as extensive networks in the art world, and when he was invited to collaborate in the Foundation's cultural project, he jumped at what he saw as a great opportunity. He was offered freedom to design and implement his own artistic projects, for which he could use the Foundation's empty buildings and receive financial sponsorship. He was also offered



free housing in a loft-style apartment in a recently renovated building in exchange for bringing other artists or art promoters to move to the Foundation's renovated buildings, from student residencies to one and two-bedroom apartments. "Imagine, he said when telling me this story, they let me live there for free *and* give me *carte blanche* to bring my friends to live there as well!"<sup>2</sup>

The vision and resources made available by the Foundation attracted a heterogeneous group of artists to work and live in the area. For the most part, and especially during the first stages of the project, it proved appealing to young, emerging artists and students with little financial resources and no access to state grants and who were excluded from the well established and hermetic art circuits in the city. But despite devastating criticisms from respected art critics, who dismissed the Foundation's project as a business venture, it attracted people with well-established trajectories and good connections. With all its flaws and limitations, the Foundation and, crucially, the fact that it was an initiative of Carlos Slim, the richest entrepreneur in the country with countless resources and immense power, seemed to offer an alternative to the fast disappearing state support for the arts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> With the collaboration of Bernardo and other artists the Foundation sponsored a number of massive and highly visible public art projects in the area since the end of 2002, some of which received significant media publicity and attracted thousands of spectators, if not praise from established art critics. Among the most visible projects were "The takeover of El Señorial" in February 2004, a series of artistic interventions that targeted an old hotel later transformed into student residencies and "From Here and There: The takeover of Vizcainas" in August of the same year, which consisted of interventions by various artists in the Vizcainas plaza and in the ex-convent of the same name. The Foundation also produced several "collective circuits" throughout 2005 and 2006: 24-hour events during which several cultural spaces were activated to attract new visitors to walk along the cultural corridor. See: Ibarra, M., Ed. (2006). Centro. Zona Sur: Gente, Calles y Arte. México, D.F., Fundación del Centro Histórico, Mantarraya Ediciones.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion about the changing relation between the state and the arts in Mexico see: Medina, C. (2002). Mutual Abuse. Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values. K. Biesenbach. New York, PS1 Contemporary Art Center: 38-47.

But the Foundation's corporate, profit-oriented logic of developing the area, renting spaces and seeing results converged with the artist's needs and desires in other ways as well. People like Pedro, Bernardo and others were not only attracted by institutional and financial resources, spaces to live, work or exhibit and the possibility of being in a community of creators, they were also lured by the urban imaginaries that I discussed in the introduction. Indeed, the role of young emerging artists as the "urban pioneers" of gentrification has been widely documented (Deutsche 1988; Smith 1996; Smith 2002). With their higher mobility, limited financial resources and aesthetic interest in the urban landscape, artists have been crucial protagonists of gentrification. As I mentioned in the Introduction, allusions to cities like New York and Barcelona, and to gentrification projects there, were recurrent. Take for example a party in the roof of a gallery promoting the work of young curators and conceptual artists, one block south of Regina Street. A common acquaintance introduced me to the curator in residence as an anthropologist studying in New York and doing research about the rescue. He gave a most welcoming smile and said, as the preamble to a long conversation that followed, that his party that night "was a little piece of New York."

Together with the circulation of such international references among people involved in the rescue, there were other very forceful imaginaries of the historic center at play. In a recent and greatly suggestive article Hansen and Verkaaik have argued that "some urban spaces are so heavily mythologized and enframed through circulating images and narratives that they suffuse, if not overdetermine, any empirical or sensory experience" (2009: 6). The historic center is such an overdetermined space. People like Bernardo shared a fascination with it as a site overflowing with the unexpected, the

strange, the chaotic and the excessive and thus containing innumerable possibilities for sensuous pleasure and for artistic creation. But such fascination was inseparable from another imaginary of the same place as frightening and threatening. Let us recall that, as thousands had moved out of the historic center after the earthquake of 1985, and as street commerce had multiplied, political demonstrations had become daily affairs and criminal rates had skyrocketed, the historic center had become a no-go area for vast segments of the middle classes, who came to associate it with unpleasant crowds, disorder, pollution, dirtiness, noise, illegality and crime. These two imaginaries were, as it were, two sides of the same coin. It was precisely the chaotic nature of the historic center that made it a particularly alluring *and* threatening space for the artists with whom I worked.

Moreover, the artists' simultaneous fascination and disgust with the particular eventfulness of the historic center was entangled with their aforementioned cosmopolitan imaginaries and desires in particular ways. As art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina has noted since their triumphant irruption in the international and cosmopolitan art scene in the early 1990s, Mexican contemporary artists have engaged in new ways of consuming their environment, namely the social, economic and political realities of Mexico in general and Mexico City in particular. But their engagement with underground cultures, inequality and urban violence has not been a form of social denouncement. Rather, argues Medina, artists have “wagered to extract from [such “underdevelopment]” some form of residual charm.” Through a cynically detached and depoliticized engagement with the world around them, artists have manifested a new cosmopolitan sensibility: their refinement as “modernized” and the display of a sublimated bad taste. In other words, the “relative complicity” or ambivalent position of contemporary artists in the violent process of

Mexico's neo-liberal transformation has opened up a wide range of critical and cynical possibilities:

If the neo-liberal agents of globalization describe a country's lack of economic, tax or labor regulations as investment incentives, why should we be surprised that artists broach topics such as the conditions of inequality, cultural clashes, merciless modernization, and social paradox in their environment as sources of refinement, which allow them to participate in the games of contemporary art? (Medina 2002: 41)

The artists living and working in the cultural corridor among whom I conducted my fieldwork navigated the different logics and imaginaries that inform and traverse the rescue, which rendered their location in the historic center ambiguous. Nowhere was this ambiguity more forcefully experienced than “on the ground,” in the complex realities that they encountered in their everyday lives, and especially vis-à-vis the old residents inhabiting the area.

### **“The Situation”**

A tall man of robust constitution and a child-like face covered by a copious beard, Pedro had a solemn and taciturn demeanor that often put people off when they first met him. For those who knew him better he was affable and funny and an exceptional storyteller who regularly seemed preoccupied or deeply absorbed in his own thoughts. He grew up in a highly educated upper-middle class household in the northern periphery of the city. A series of misfortunes in the 1980s compromised the socioeconomic status of his family, and he was forced to take odd jobs in order to put himself through college, the same liberal arts university attended by Bernardo. Before joining the staff of Culture Space in early 2005, he made a living by writing book and art reviews for cultural magazines. Pedro also invested the little money he had as well as a great deal of time and

effort into opening a bar on the ground floor of the cultural center, after receiving a subsidized rent deal for the premises from the Foundation.

Pedro's bar opened its doors in the fall of 2005, at the same time as Culture Space, and it soon became the unofficial hang out place for its staff and the site of many of its activities. For all these reasons, Pedro was not only highly invested in the rescue, but he also had a unique perspective as both cultural promoter and small entrepreneur. Moreover, the corner location of his bar, and especially its layout, which featured four wide and always-open roll-up doors offered him a privileged vantage point from which to observe the comings and goings of the street, to receive all sorts of gossip and rumors, and to witness the gradual but dramatic changes brought about by rescue.

When I started frequenting the area in early 2006—one year before Pedro placed his URGENT NOTICE in the renovated *callejón*—Regina was a nondescript, relatively quiet and predominantly residential street. With little pedestrian or vehicular traffic, it contrasted greatly with the hustle and bustle of most surrounding streets, characterized by intense street-vending activities, masses of people on the move and constant traffic jams. Regina's architecture juxtaposed disparate styles, periods and origins, and with the exception of a seventeenth century church and its adjacent convent, fine examples of the baroque style, it lacked significant landmark constructions. Most buildings had been erected in the late 1800s and the first decades of the twentieth century. There were several large two or three-story houses originally built for single families, some made of *tezontle*, the reddish purple volcanic rock of coarse texture widely used in colonial constructions. There were also some examples of modernist architecture—five or six story buildings erected in the 1930s and 40s as apartment houses for the professional

middle classes. Almost all of these buildings had followed a pattern of deterioration and substitution of tenants. As their more prosperous inhabitants had moved out, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, they had become *vecindades*, low quality housing for the lower classes.

Like most of the historic center, with the exception of its more affluent and monumental core a few blocks north, this street looked old and neglected. Its nearly treeless sidewalks were worn out and its buildings appeared in bad shape, some with minor cracks or faded painting and others about to fall apart. For the most part these buildings combined housing on the upper floors with commercial uses on the ground floors, mostly small businesses such as crammed grocery stores, a shoe-repair, a barbershop, a tailor and a butcher that catered to the local population. There were also various *fondas*—cheap restaurants serving lunch to nearby office workers and bureaucrats—as well as several machine repair workshops. The narrow street that connected Regina with the next street to the north, and which some months later would become the pedestrian square where Pedro placed his URGENT NOTICE, highlighted the impression of abandonment. It was the neighborhood's dumping ground, as many people threw their trash at one of its corners, where it could remain uncollected for days. Local drunkards were its frequent inhabitants and it was also the site of the area's small-scale drug dealing operations. In such context, Culture Space, as well as the two residential buildings near the east side end of Regina that had recently been renovated, with their neatly painted facades and restored doors, windows and ledges, visibly stood out from the rest of the constructions (See Figure 3).



Figure 3. Detail of Regina Street with renovated building on the left and *vecindad* on the right. Photograph by author.

During one of my first encounters with Pedro in February 2006, he asserted his knowledge of the street to me, the recently arrived anthropologist interested in crime and security in the context of rescue. He gave me a lengthy description of the “situation”, as he called it, while we stood below one of the open roll-up doors of his bar facing the street, partially inside and partially on the sidewalk. Pedro spoke at length of “the twenty-seven,” a dilapidated, two-story building located near the western corner of the block, which he described as the most aggressive *vecindad* in the area and as the center of operations of the local drug dealers, a group of guys in their teens and early twenties. These young men also controlled the opposite end of the *callejón*, and he advised me

never to arrive to the cultural center from that direction, as they were particularly aggressive towards women. He mentioned a couple of incidents of theft as well as violent attacks on the visitors of the cultural center and, especially, on residents of the few renovated buildings nearby, but these occurrences were diminishing (I paraphrase from my fieldnotes):

These guys haven't made a formal presentation, they haven't revealed their identities, they don't approach [my bar] or Culture Space, but I think that they have done us an initiation rite without our noticing, I think they have accepted us as part of the street.

Pedro believed that such acceptance was related to the increasing police presence in the area. "They surely dislike having so much surveillance in the street," he said. But he also expressed doubts about the efficacy of the policemen guarding Culture Space and the renovated buildings property of Slim, which as we will see later, occupy an ambiguous position between public police and private security. "They might be young and handsome, the policemen hired by [Slim], but they lack the tools to handle this situation," Pedro asserted. Together with his references to the police, he insisted that the guys from the twenty-seven were getting used to the new comers: "I think they identify us (nos ubican)," he said, "and so they don't do anything to us."

According to Pedro negotiating with the neighbors was key to becoming accepted as part of the street. As the owner of the bar he made an effort to be respectful towards them, keeping the music's volume down and closing the roll-up curtains if events or parties were getting exceedingly loud or continuing until the small hours and he happily reported that some neighbors were entering his business. He wanted acceptance and amicable relations with his neighbors but he ridiculed as naïve the view that culture



would redeem the historic center and its inhabitants. In his opinion, the opening of cultural spaces would not solve the problems of the street, the lack of opportunities and the social resentment. He continued:

The reality is that the center is changing. The Oxxos and seven eleven's will proliferate. Starbucks will be opened in the area, rents will increase and the people that live there will have to move to the periphery. We are a very interesting phenomenon for anthropologists.

It is, of course, after an extended period of fieldwork and after the area has indeed changed dramatically,<sup>4</sup> that Pedro's remarks that afternoon about the dangers and complexities of living and working in the historic center attain a particular significance. They touch upon a number of issues that I encountered over and over throughout my fieldwork. To begin with, Pedro's words expressed anxiety about the always-present possibility of being attacked. Such anticipation of danger, and more precisely of theft or assault is, to be sure, part of life in a megalopolis like Mexico City and not particular to the historic center, although the latter, particularly its *vecindades*, is commonly associated with violent crime.<sup>5</sup> But in this particular case the anticipation of danger was not predicated upon anonymity and chance encounter. On the contrary, it was linked to sporadic violent occurrences, from street muggings to aggressive trespasses into renovated apartment buildings, carried out by people who lived on the same street.<sup>6</sup> So

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<sup>4</sup> In the Fall of 2008 the *Autoridad del Centro Histórico* (See Introduction, footnote five) converted Regina in its entirety into a pedestrian street, consolidating the "cultural corridor" project.

<sup>5</sup> For an analyzes the figure of the *cortico* (a tenement house similar to the *vecindad*) in imaginaries of fear in Sao Paulo, Brazil see: Caldeira, T. P. d. R. (2000). City of walls: crime, segregation, and citizenship in São Paulo. Berkeley, University of California Press.

<sup>6</sup> Here I conceptualize threat as always predicated on the latent possibility of violence and, as such, as inhabiting a temporality of anticipation. As opposed to uneventful urban contexts, such as those discussed by in Brian Massumi's edited volume (the United States) as well as by Marilyn Ivy (Japan), Mexico City's historic center is a densely eventful space, where "violence" (in the form of criminality, prostitution,

while in the city at large people navigate symbolic geographies that assign danger to generic places or characters that do not necessarily correspond to concrete physical locations, the source of danger was spatially locatable for Pedro. It came from “the twenty-seven.” And yet it was unknowable.<sup>7</sup> “They haven’t revealed their identities,” he said, implying that he couldn’t know who they were or what were their intentions. While he thought and hoped that he had been accepted as part of the street, he could not be sure. If there had been indeed an initiation rite, it had eluded his powers of observation.

But Pedro’s explanation of “the situation” suggested that there was something more to his feeling of vulnerability. While he could not know “them,” the opposite was not true. *Nos ubican*, he said, which can be translated as both “they locate us” or “they identify us” and “they don’t do anything to us.” This statement, however, signaled the possibility that the opposite might be the case: *because* they locate us, they *could* (and maybe *would*) do something to us. In other words, Pedro’s anxiety stemmed from feeling observed by an unlocatable “them” and not being able to know (much less to control) what they saw or projected onto him.

The “they” in question was a rather slippery pronoun. It referred to the tough guys that Pedro described as hostile, dangerous and, at the end of the day, criminal – involved in robberies, assaults and drug dealing operations. As such “they” seemed to stand apart

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poverty) is widespread. In this context threat emerges from the disavowal of violence and, at the same time, from the impossibility of this disavowal. In other words, threat signals to the inescapability of urban violence and to people’s own embeddedness in it. Massumi, B. (1993). *The Politics of everyday fear*. Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, Ivy, M. (1996). "Tracking the Mystery Man with the 21 Faces." *Critical Inquiry* 23: 11-36, Masco, J. (2008). ""Survival is your Business:" Engineering Affect and Ruins in Nuclear America." *Cultural Anthropology* 23(2): 361-398, Kernaghan, R. (2009). *Coca's gone: of might and right in the Huallaga post-boom*. Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of urban geographies of fear see: Reguillo, R. (2004). "The Oracle in the City: Beliefs, Practices and Symbolic Geographies." *Social Text* 22(4): 35-46.

from another crucial figure in Pedro's ruminations: "the neighbors" (*los vecinos*). These were people with whom he could talk and negotiate, people whom he would welcome in his bar and who would participate in Culture Space's activities. But in fact, as will become clearer in the course of this chapter, the distinction between the friendly neighbor and the menacing other turned out to be rather porous and unstable for him. The "tough guys" were not mere strangers but were actually an integral part of the neighborhood's social fabric. They had mothers and fathers and siblings and friends, some of whom might very well have been involved in Culture Space's activities. The neighbor, then, kept sliding into the dangerous, criminal other, and vice versa. This oscillation seemed to heighten Pedro's sense of out of placeness and vulnerability.

Before I proceed further, a few words about my use of the term "neighbor" are in order. The term "neighbor" designates a special relation and a particular form of sociability. The neighbor is someone who is near and far; someone who lives next door and whom one doesn't know. Being a good neighbor entails engaging in certain forms of intimacy while respecting certain rules of civility. But it is also a potentially fraught relation. As Kenneth Reinhardt has written, the figure of the neighbor "materializes the uncertain division between the friend/family/self and the enemy/stranger/other" (Zizek, Santner et al. 2005: 18). The artists and cultural promoters who worked in Culture Space used the term the neighbors (*los vecinos*) in reference to the old inhabitants of the historic center, collapsing together a heterogeneous group of people into a more or less homogeneous, more or less cohesive lower class "community", as I will explain in more detail below. As such, the ambivalent figure of the neighbor captured new residents' aspiration to a certain interclass sociability and, at the same time, their uneasiness with

this form of sociability.

What I'm suggesting in my reading of my conversation with Pedro is that he expressed a double anxiety over misrecognition. First, his words conveyed an anxiety of not being able to properly locate the other in its doubled appearance as neighbor *and* criminal type, which turned out to be a rather slippery distinction.

Who was at home in the historic center? Who was a neighbor? Who was a menacing and resentful other? How was Pedro to know the difference? This anxiety can be traced back to a long history of elite and middle class fears of the popular classes in Mexico, crystallized in the context of Mexico City, and at different historical moments, in iconic figures such as “the Indian” “the *lépero*”, or “the *pelado*”, all alluding to the urban poor.<sup>8</sup> These figures have been at once the target of multiple reform efforts and the sites in which both the elites and the middle classes have elaborated of their own social identities, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

But the manner in which Pedro talked about the inhabitants of Regina and the *callejón* and the dangers that he faced suggested that the gaze of this elusive other triggered in him a different anxiety: the possibility of his—the artist—being misrecognized by “them,” which made him feel more vulnerable to attack. This preoccupation resonates with the ambiguous location of the bohemian/artist within urban modernity. While the artist constitutes his identity in opposition to bourgeois values and

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<sup>8</sup> For discussions of these figures at different historical moments see: Viqueira Albán, J. P. (1987). *Relajados o reprimidos? Diversiones públicas y vida social en la Ciudad de México durante el Siglo de las Luces*. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Piccato, P. (2001). *City of suspects: crime in Mexico City, 1900-1931*. Durham N.C., Duke University Press, Prieto Hernández, A. M. (2001). *Acerca de la penderciera e indisciplinada vida de los léperos capitalinos*. México, D.F., Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Dirección General de Culturas Populares e Indígenas.

sensibilities, celebrating his autonomy and *l'art pour l'art*, he is at the same time deeply embedded in the logic of the market. As Susan Buck-Morss has argued in her reading of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, the bohemian/artist has historically sustained an ambivalent relation to the masses of the poor in the modern city. The poor are a figure of fascination and disavowal for the bohemian/artist, of fleeting solidarity but, ultimately, of social distance (Buck-Morss 1986). Pedro's anxiety over misrecognition, then, must be understood both in relation to the position of the artist and in relation to his ambiguous location within Mexico's class and socio-ethnic hierarchies, including the discourses and practices of rescue.

### **Standing Out**

Concerns about danger and especially about the subtle hostility and resentment of the historic center's inhabitants, such as those expressed by Pedro, surfaced quite often when people who were involved—either by working at the cultural center or by living in renovated buildings—talked about the urban renovation project. In fact, I was repeatedly told that the Foundation created Culture Space in response to such hostility and in an effort to heal a hostile and violent neighborhood. That is how Bernardo, the performance artist that I mentioned above, described its mission when I first met him in January 2006. And he added in a tone of complicity, as if making a most intimate confession, that when he was working on conceptualizing the project and the space he had serious doubts whether such an endeavor was a good idea at all. "I remember telling a friend, he said, that I feared that they would kill me," and he narrated a couple of stories of intimidating attacks and robberies to new residents. I paraphrase from my fieldnotes:

I'm going to tell you the truth, there are guys who have been assaulted and have left immediately, or they just have been intimidated and they leave. Living in the Center is a matter of attitude, you cannot pretend that you are at *la condechi*,<sup>9</sup> I mean if you bring three Argentinean women and make a lot of noise on the street, you're calling attention upon yourself and you're not respecting the territory. (...) Or they walk in fear, and of course they are assaulted. (...) Robberies are not violent; they're to intimidate. My neighbor was robbed outside our building; he was told: "let's see *güerito*<sup>10</sup> give me your jacket". Another arrives home with his laptop and they tell him something like: "Where are you from, [this renovated building] or [that renovated building]? Don't even say a word because we're protected by the police, and we'll be watching you *güerito*". He left the next day.

Bernardo's retelling of these incidents echoes Pedro's concern over being observed.

His words suggest that in Regina one cannot hide. Just like the buildings that one inhabits, one stands out. Indeed, the trope of "standing out" repeatedly figured in stories as well as in conversations that I witnessed throughout my fieldwork, and it appeared as ambivalently desired. After all, the artist's lifestyle entails a certain aestheticization of the self, a certain being seen or "standing out." Precisely the opposite of going unnoticed. But for Pedro and Bernardo "standing out" slipped into insecurity and vulnerability. A very common statement was that one stands out because one has arrived to a *barrio*<sup>11</sup> where everyone knows each other and is suspicious of newcomers. But references to "standing out" *also* suggested that there was more to it than being new. Bernardo seemed to be saying that the people in his stories were a particular type of newcomer. The man walking down the street with "three Argentinean women" brought unwarranted attention

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<sup>9</sup> A neighborhood in Mexico City that was "gentrified" throughout the 1990s. Featuring a variety of cultural venues, consumption venues and an intense nightlife, it is a privileged area for young professionals, artists, and intellectuals.

<sup>10</sup> A term with both racial and class connotations, it designates people with fair skin and middle-class demeanor. In the following chapter I will engage in an extensive discussion of how this term saturates daily social interactions in Mexico City.

<sup>11</sup> A term with multiple associations often used to refer to rough neighborhoods, where people have a sense of belonging and pride and look out for one another.

upon himself. But so did others just by the way they walked or by their appearance, which made them vulnerable to attack.

A complicated image of “public space” emerges from the trope of “standing out.” Bernardo’s anecdotes suggest that one cannot disappear into the urban landscape and preserve the anonymity that the historic center supposedly offers. One cannot get lost in the crowd, without betraying a certain social identity. In other words, the historic center appears in Bernardo’s rendition less as a space of anonymity and chance encounter, the commonly accepted understanding of “public space,” than a *barrio*, where social relations are based on intimate knowledge. This reverberates with Pedro’s view that threat in Regina is neither anonymous nor abstract. In other words, the misrecognitions in Regina happen within a particular type of social relation, that of neighborliness, which combines intimacy and anonymity, nearness and remoteness. The trope of standing out then throws into question the very idea of anonymity that runs through the literature on public space (as I discussed in the introduction). For it locates new residents within a dense web of spatial and social relations where one can never be entirely “anonymous.”

Stranger sociability—that particular form of being in common enabled by mass mediation—is not only central to the Habermasian public sphere, but also to the imagined community of the nation. As Povinelli and Gaonkar write (following Benjamin Lee and Michael Warner), the reading practices implicit in the semiotic forms of specific printed texts, such as novels and newspapers, “make it possible for persons to imagine and recognize themselves as constituting a non-copresent body of people/citizens of a modern nation—as strangers who are no longer strange, exotic, or unexpected” (Povinelli and Gaonkar 2003: p. 390). Stranger sociability is, then, not only predicated on the

availability and circulation of particular textual forms but, quite crucially, on the domestication of the stranger or, more precisely, of the difference that he entails.

In a footnote to “Publics and Counterpublics” (2002) Michael Warner rebukes Simmel’s understanding of the stranger in his famous 1908 essay because, according to Warner, “he fails to distinguish between the stranger as represented by the trader or the Wandering Jew and the stranger whose presence in modernity is unremarkable, even necessary, to the nature of modern polities” (fn, p. 56). But what Simmel’s essay suggests is precisely that the distinction between the unremarkable stranger (in whom I can recognize traces of myself) and the unexpected, mysterious and, ultimately, menacing stranger is never definite and unambiguous.

To be sure, Simmel posits the sociological form of “the stranger” as designating a positive relation, that is a “form of being together, a form of union based on interaction” (Simmel 1971: p. 143). What characterizes this relation is the simultaneous nearness and remoteness of the stranger:

[He] is close to us insofar as we feel between him and ourselves similarities of nationality or social position, of occupation or of general human nature. He is far from us insofar as these similarities extend beyond him and us, they connect us only because they connect a great many people (p. 147).

The difference of the stranger is thus disavowed in the “great many people” with whom we share our commonalities. In other words, “strangeness” designates precisely these general commonalities that enable interaction and being together. The stranger appears unremarkable in this rendition, as in the “imagined community” of the nation. But earlier in the essay Simmel hints at another trait of the stranger, his difference not necessarily conducive to commonality. He is both inside and outside. He is part of “us”



and at the same time he comes from elsewhere: “The stranger is the potential wanderer, so to speak, who, although he has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going.” (143) The stranger, in other words, cannot be permanently fixed either spatially or socially. Precisely as the trader or the Wandering Jew, he is unlocatable. The differences that he entails can thus be menacing.

What I want to suggest is that the figure of the stranger as discussed by Simmel bears close resemblances to the figure of the neighbor that appears in Pedro’s ruminations. As we will see below, it is precisely in the tension of the stranger that I locate Pedro and Bernardo’s anxiety over “standing out” and, inseparable from this anxiety, the slippage from neighbor to menacing other in quotidian interaction. Let me elaborate on this point by further exploring how new residents construed and experienced the figure of the neighbor and how it continuously slipped into the figure of a menacing other.

### **Healing the Neighborhood through Art**

Robberies and violent events such as those mentioned by Pedro and Bernardo were, to be sure, few and sporadic. What people like Eduardo, a visual artist in his late twenties who moved into the first renovated building on Regina in the early stages of the rescue, talked about was a general atmosphere of aggression, hostile looks, occasional murmurings as he walked down the street, which was for him intensified by a general state of decay, uncollected trash, lack of street lighting at night. However, constantly re-narrated, the violent incidents had acquired quasi-mythical dimensions among those involved in the rescue and Regina and the *callejón* had come to signify the hostility of the

historic center and its inhabitants.<sup>12</sup> Thus Bernardo and other artists received the task of conceptualizing a cultural space that would mitigate the impact of the renovation while at the same time bringing together two different publics: the “neighbors” of the historic center and the artistic elites. The strategy, as Bernardo explained during our aforementioned first interview, was to offer a variety of arts and crafts workshops primarily targeting local children, because, he said, “once you win the children the families will follow,” while simultaneously supporting experimental art projects and exhibitions.

To carry out the goal of attracting multiple and heterogeneous publics, Bernardo brought together a collection of disparate people with a wide variety of interests and stakes in the project. Among many others there was Lucas, a disheveled and permanently broke visual artist and engraver who for years had run an independent art collective in a nearby semi-abandoned building that once belonged to his late grandfather and was the object of a fierce legal battle. He ran a variety of arts and crafts workshops for local children. There was also Omar, a stylish actor and theater director and an old friend and colleague of Bernardo who had moved to a renovated building across the street from the cultural center. He organized a wide range of activities, from drama workshops to alternative fashion shows. From a very different background, there was Sebastián, a conceptual video-artist and curator in his late 30’s with a well-established trajectory and reputation in Mexico City’s contemporary art scene. Severely criticized by friends and colleagues in the art world for both joining a project with an ill reputation and for selling-

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of crime stories and their effects on how people inhabit the city see: Caldeira, T. P. d. R. (2000). City of walls: crime, segregation, and citizenship in São Paulo. Berkeley, University of California Press.

out to Carlos Slim, he had decided to take the risk. He curated art installation projects, ran an international artist in-residence-program and hosted acoustic improvisation gigs. Pedro, for his part, was interested in organizing book and poetry readings as well in taking poetry to the streets. The space itself was informal and disorganized, with a variety of adults and children entering and leaving throughout the day, always under the gaze of a police officer permanently standing at the entrance, and multiple disparate activities taking place simultaneously: a yoga class in one room, a talk by a transdisciplinary artist in the next.

From the start there were multiple conflicts between these people, arising from contrasting aesthetic sensibilities as well as from competition over funding. Yet the most contentious issue, which was constantly discussed in staff meetings and one-to-one conversations, was how to work with the neighbors or the community. Some found the cultural center's eclecticism appealing—Omar called it a *vecindad* for the arts where everyone could do their own work. Others, like Sebastián wanted to position Culture Space in the city's contemporary art circuit and dismissed as naïve the idea that culture would redeem the neighborhood. This issue gave rise to a cacophony of voices, often talking past each other:

We should offer more workshops?

I feel like a Franciscan monk, doing the work for the colonizers.

The activities should cost something, even if it is only a symbolic amount, otherwise the neighbors won't appreciate them.

They should cancel the workshops.

The workshops should be free and open to all.

The mothers come to me and say thank you, thank you for giving alternatives to

my children.

The neighbors will associate us with a paternalistic state.

The neighbors are opening up.

There should be more clarity about the mission of [Culture Space]. I cannot invite serious artists to exhibit here. There are kids doing macramé! This is an embarrassment.

The neighbors are angry. They feel invaded.

We have to understand that these are very different worlds. It is very difficult to bring them together. There's mutual distrust.

There was something that seemed to go without saying in such cacophony: the “neighbors” appeared to be a homogeneous group of people, who knew each other and were hermetic, hostile and aggressive to strangers, were generally poor and uneducated and lacked opportunities. But the inhabitants of Regina and the *callejón* were a collection of people of disparate social classes and backgrounds. According to census statistics the residents of Regina and surrounding streets were “lower middle class families,” which is a generally accurate if necessarily incomplete description (2000). The area was inhabited by a wide variety of people. There were families who owned small businesses in the area, such as cheap restaurants, small convenience stores, or shoe repair workshops. There were truck drivers, construction workers, cleaning ladies, food market sellers, seamstresses. There were many engaged in informal street activities, especially food selling. For example, there was a family that sold *quesadillas* every evening in a street-stand; others sold tropical juices every morning; a man who had recently lost his job as a janitor now sold corn nearby. Most local kids attended public schools in the vicinity and many dropped out after secondary school.

There were marked differences and hierarchies among these “old” residents, which

could be roughly mapped onto a hierarchy between buildings. The clearest distinction was drawn between *vecindades* with clear legal status, renovated during the program that followed the 1985 earthquake and that had granted ownership to those who could prove long time residency, and other buildings, crumbling and partly squatted, that lacked judicial certainty and had not been renovated in decades.<sup>13</sup> This distinction mapped onto another one, drawn between long time residents nostalgic for the long gone respectability of the neighborhood and relatively recent migrants. There was also a marked distinction between Regina and the *callejón*, whose inhabitants, together with those of “the twenty seven,” occupied the lowest status in the neighborhood’s hierarchy. Moreover, the area lacked cohesion or robust neighbors’ organizations and was far from being a “community”, in contrast to other neighborhoods to the east with strong local identities.<sup>14</sup>

This heterogeneity of the neighborhood, moreover, was expressed in how different people reacted to the rescue and to Culture Space. Some appreciated the new lighting, police presence and cultural activities organized by Culture Space and established amicable relations with the artists and cultural promoters working there. Others were skeptical about the renovated buildings and its occupants, and emphasized their own

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<sup>13</sup> The earthquake that shook Mexico City in 1985 causing significant damage and destruction in the Historic Center affected many *vecindades*, including those on Regina and the *callejón*, which were at that point severely run-down and overcrowded. Many of them were reconstructed through the Popular Housing Renovation Program, a major relief effort launched in the wake of the catastrophe and partly in response to massive demonstrations. The state expropriated and rebuilt hundreds of buildings in the historic center, giving ownership to those who could document previous occupancy. In this way, many residents changed from inhabitants of rudimentary *vecindades* to proud condominium owners of newly renovated housing. See: (1987). La reconstrucción de vivienda en el centro histórico de la ciudad de México después de los sismos de septiembre de 1985/ Renovación Habitacional Popular en el D. F. Nairobi, Kenya, United Nations Centre for Human Settlements Habitat: 71.

<sup>14</sup> While the mass social mobilizations of the late 1980s that followed the earthquake had generated a high level of collective integration among the residents of this area, this slowly died down.

exclusion from cultural and artistic events and from the new consumption spaces. Many homeowners celebrated the increase in the value of their apartments, in contrast to renters or people whose housing conditions were legally tenuous and who feared eviction.

But the point to be made is that even if the old residents were the focus of all the voices in the cacophony that I presented above, all their complexities, differences, hierarchies and tensions, seemed to go unnoticed. They became visible only as “the neighbors,” that is to say, they became visible as lower class people to be reached and redeemed by art, or as resentful figures reacting to their neighborhood’s transformation. To be sure, many of the artists working in Culture Space had an uncomfortable, or even openly antagonistic, relation to the cultural center’s pedagogical or redeeming vocation, as indeed a pedagogical project appeared to them as very different from an aesthetic one. Some were reluctant to speak in a pedagogical voice, which they associated with a paternalistic state. However, in their very refusal they repeated the logic that they disavowed, as they seemed unable to imagine approaching the center’s old inhabitants in a way other than a pedagogical project.

It was precisely as “the neighbors” that old residents slipped into the position of menacing others. While it was clear that not everyone was engaged in criminal activities, and indeed many in Culture Space enjoyed amicable relations with many families in the vicinity, what preoccupied artists such as Pedro was a more diffuse violence and aggression; a powerlessness to understand the unwritten rules and codes of the street and to know where threat originated. Moreover, there was anxiety over being observed without being able to control what “the neighbors” saw. In the next section I will explore these slippages in a series of interactions in the *callejón* that was the object of Pedro’s

URGENT NOTICE.

### **Neighbors in the *Callejón***

In the early months of 2006, the upcoming renovation of the *callejón* was the talk of Culture Space. There was a lot of anticipation as to how this change would affect their work as well as their standing in the neighborhood. People were looking forward to a renovated space, where they would hold their activities. Others were hopeful that the area would be safer and that the *callejón* would cease to be the dumping ground for the neighborhood's trash. Alongside this positive anticipation, however, there was a growing sense of paranoia surrounding the renovation, which grew as the actual renovation works began in late March. On any given day, Bernardo could be seen standing outside Culture Space, surveying the progress and looking preoccupied, as if anticipating how the neighbors would react to such a visible project. One afternoon as I was sitting in a *callejón* with Omar, the theater director, when the renovation works were in full swing a young man murmured something as he walked in front of us. "Did you hear what he said?" Omar asked me. I had not heard. So Omar repeated the young man's words: "rich assholes, they think they can privatize the street." It was in moments like this that the vulnerability of the artists, and especially the fact they were caught, as it were, between different interests and sensibilities—the interests of the Foundation, their own aspiration to a beautified space and their imagination of what the "neighbors" perceived—came to the surface.

Such paranoia was connected to rumors that "the neighbors" were angry and wanted to know what the square would be used for; or that someone had threatened to

organize a rally to demand a public meeting where the proposed changes would be openly explained and discussed. The problem was that there had been no public announcement or discussion about the renovation plan. Bernardo had been busy negotiating budgets, permits and timelines with the various institutions implicated in the project. Once he received approval, Bernardo moved to garner support among local residents, and especially among the owners of the few businesses in the *callejón*, whose work would be directly impacted by the changes. The absence of public discussion about the renovation works also captured the new residents ambivalent relation to the neighbors. When I asked Bernardo why he had not held a public meeting to discuss the project he replied that he was not sure he would have been able to handle such a meeting, as probably there would have been too much hostility.

All negotiations, that is, the gathering of the neighbor's consent, had been indirect and informal. Pedro, for example, remembered the night when they got the approval of the *tortilleros*, the owners of a tortilla shop adjacent to the cultural center who were particularly hostile to new residents and vehemently opposed to the closing of the *callejón* to vehicular traffic. It happened one evening as a Foundation executive, Bernardo and Pedro were drinking at the bar. They invited the *tortilleros* to join and kept buying them drinks until they were absolutely trashed. "They would go out to vomit and return," Pedro recalled, "it was very uncomfortable." At around 4 in the morning *los tortilleros* finally acquiesced to support the project: "If you want to close the *callejón*, go ahead and do it."

While marking a moment when tensions between new and old residents receded, and agreement was reached, Pedro's story stressed discomfort and, indeed, the seeming



out of placeness of this interaction. What remained unclear was whether discomfort aroused because of the type of consent he received from the brothers, one given at a point of severe intoxication, or from their very proximity (and their vomiting). For even as he invited them to sit and drink at his table, to talk about a project of public interest, the difference of the *tortilleros* appeared irreducible, even a bit disgusting, in Pedro's recollections. In a sense, the brothers' street-smart demeanor and appearance, their idiomatic expressions and their hostility towards new comers positioned them as belonging to the center's underworld. Indeed, Pedro sometimes referred to them as *los Corleone*, in reference to the most famous mafia family. Even if the nature and extent of their supposedly illicit activities was unclear, *los tortilleros* stood for the criminality and disorder afflicting the historic center. And yet, while embodying the atavisms from which the historic center had to be recovered, they were also "the neighbors." The brothers were part of the local inhabitants whose living conditions were supposed to improve by rescue.

After the renovation was completed there was an official inauguration ceremony, with representatives from Mexico City's government and the Foundation. The artworks produced by local children in the workshops were exhibited during the event but people from the neighborhood were not invited, despite Bernardo's argument that such exclusion would send the wrong message to an already mistrustful community. While the guests sat around tables that had been placed in the newly renovated square, making it look like a terrace of Pedro's bar, drinking champagne, there was tension among the staff of the cultural center. Bernardo, donning a suit for the occasion, divided his time talking to state functionaries and walking to the other end of the *callejón*, to chat with the *tortilleros*, who witnessed the inauguration ceremony from a distance. At some point a furious Omar

approached Bernardo to complain for what he considered an affront to the neighbors.

“They know—he said-- that they would be arrested if they drank [alcoholic beverages] on the street, which is forbidden, but not the rich, they can do whatever they want.” As it unfolded, this inaugural event gestured towards the boundaries of the “all of us” in Pedro’s URGENT NOTICE. It crystallized a long history of inclusion and exclusion of the lower classes. At the same time, it forcefully captured the artists’ particularly ambiguous locations within that history and, more precisely, its particular reenactment in the context of rescue.

The new pedestrian square marked the inauguration of a new era. The renovated square dramatically changed the atmosphere of the space. The local drug dealers relocated to another street one block south. Also gone were the drunkards and the homeless. The trash on the corner disappeared, even if only for a few months. And under the constant watch of Culture Space’s police guard, the pedestrian square became the playground for local children and a preferred spot for nearby office workers to eat lunch. It also became the site of many of Culture Space’s activities, from family oriented events, such as a treasure hunt to celebrate children’s day to video-art projections and performance pieces. Even when events took place indoors, such as art exhibit openings, which happen almost every other Wednesday evening, it became an extension of both the cultural center and Pedro’s bar.



Figure 4. Music performance at the *callejón*. Photograph by author.

Tensions appeared to have subsided and the staff of Culture Space talked about the rescue of the square as an accomplished undertaking. Indeed, they referred to it as a most enjoyable space. Yet the anticipation of threat as well as the elusive distinction between neighbors and menacing other remained. Take for instance an opening night a few months after the inauguration. The exhibition consisted of visual and audio records of a series of artistic interventions in neighboring public squares by a group of Austrian artists. The display of photographs, videos and objects throughout the cultural center continued outside the building, into the *callejón*. Here, arranged as a living room of sorts, there were three sofas and a coffee table upholstered with plastic tablecloths commonly found in inexpensive restaurants. Above them, a video projected onto the wall in front of

the cultural center showed the same furniture placed as an installation in various other public squares, as well as passersby reactions to it.

The mostly young and stylish audience moved between the interior of the cultural center and the square, with some people sitting on the sofas, drinking wine, while others sat at the bar. A police car was parked at the corner, with two police officers looking distractedly at the crowd or at times chatting with their partner who occasionally left his post at the entrance to Culture Space to approach them. On the opposite side of the square a bunch of kids and teenagers from the surrounding *vecindades* played a soccer match. Someone in the audience mentioned that she felt as if they were in a “little town” and commended the social life the square was taking and expressed her appreciation of the kids and teenagers using it as a playground and a soccer field. A while later, Pedro was furious at the bar, since he had just realized that the ball with which the kids were playing was the same one that had been stolen from his bar a few days before. In that moment, the image of the kids playing, hailed as illustrating the rescue’s success in the *callejón* and the forms of sociability that it enabled slipped into an image of danger and threat: kids loitering, amounting to nothing good, dirtying the space, or even plotting to assault the visitors of the square the cultural center and the bar.

These interactions moreover, were saturated with anxiety about the artists’ perceived proximity—at once desired and dreaded—to Carlos Slim himself, who was viewed by many as an all-powerful force (see Chapter 4). Pedro expressed it quite clearly during the incidents with Manuel that I discussed in the introduction. Pedro thought that it was better to leave things as they were, in a tacit agreement of non-aggression. He believed that in the end it was he who would pay the consequences for getting too close

to the guys from that particular *vecindad*. They could think that there was a lot of money in his bar, when in fact sometimes he barely made enough to pay the rent. “How would they know”, he said, “that I’m not Slim’s nephew?” In the next section I will explore how another crucial figure of the rescue, the police, calmed new residents anxieties while at the same time making them more vulnerable by heightening their “standing out” in the neighborhood.

### **Of Yuppies and Policemen**

Eduardo, a talented visual artist in his late twenties, was among the first to move to a renovated building in the cultural corridor. He learnt about the availability of apartment rentals for artists while living in a southern working class suburb of Mexico City and working odd jobs to pay the rent and meet the alimony payments for his two children. Although at five thousand pesos per month the rent in a recently renovated nine-unit building far exceeded his budget, he saw living there as an opportunity to gain access to art networks. Despite much effort and after years of showing his work in small cultural centers and marginal museums, Eduardo had not been able to access Mexico City’s gallery circuit. He moved in the summer of 2003 and quickly befriended the residents of other already occupied apartments: Alex and Nancy, a young couple of emerging visual artists who like him were craving recognition; Omar, the theater director who would later work in Culture Space; the editor of a minor arts magazine. A strong social bond formed among these tenants, with intense social activities and late night visits to each other’s places happening on an almost daily basis. A hostile and aggressive environment on the street reinforced such intense conviviality within the building.

In the summer of 2005 Eduardo hosted a party in his apartment. It unfolded as many others before it, with considerable flows of people between several different apartments and the rooftop, which functioned as a common terrace for the building. He was in this terrace at around two in the morning when the music coming from his place suddenly came to a stop and indistinct loud screams were heard. He ran downstairs. Five guys from the *vecindad* down the street had entered Eduardo's apartment and were attempting to rob his guests. One of the intruders tried to break a beer bottle by smashing it against a wooden table. He failed. In the midst of the confusion Eduardo's brother punched the guy in the face. A fight broke out. Eduardo reminisced (I paraphrase from my fieldnotes):

They thought they would find only helpless yuppies in my party, but what they didn't expect is that there would be a bunch of very rough people. I had guests from really tough hoods and they didn't expect that. The guys fled as fast as they could (*los chavos salieron por patas*) and we chased them all the way to the *vecindad*.

But by the time Eduardo and his friends arrived at the *vecindad* their assailants had already entered. Several angry women, blocking the gate, prevented their access. Someone called the police and they quickly showed up. Unable (or unwilling) to enter the *vecindad* they stationed their police car at the entrance to Eduardo's building, where they remained day and night for an entire week.

We have already encountered the conspicuous presence of the police in this area. They appeared in Pedro's notice and in the excerpts from conversations with him and with Bernardo. We also encountered them standing guard at the entrance to Culture Space, watching local children play in the renovated *callejón*, or parked at the corner of Regina during a night event. As I discussed in the Introduction, the police have been a

constitutive element of the rescue. In the area of the cultural corridor the security apparatus involved patrols from the Industrial and Banking Police (PBI), a supplementary force originally created to provide indoors security for private entities at their own expense. Partially sponsored by Carlos Slim, the PBI performed public policing duties in this area of the historic center. While they were originally limited to the policing of public space —patrolling the streets on foot during the day and by car during the night— the PBI were introduced into the Foundation’s residential buildings following the assault on Eduardo’s building and the ensuing threat of leaving from several of its tenants.

This arrangement continued for over a year. However, towards the end of my fieldwork, residents in these buildings, most of whom had moved in after the break in, were distressed at the Foundation’s plan to discontinue security services altogether, citing the need to reduce costs. A few months earlier, the PBI had been substituted with civil security guards, to the dismay of tenants. Omar, the theater director referred to their security services as “a pension program for the elderly.” But the news of a complete termination of security services or even their decrease to one shift a day appeared simply unacceptable for the building’s residents. They believed that safety in the area continued to be rather precarious and the building still stood out from the surrounding environment.

The police thus appear as a crucial figure in the complex dynamic of location and misrecognition that I have been discussing in this chapter. In Eduardo’s retelling of the break-in he imagined being seen as a “yuppie” and didn’t recognize himself in the other’s gaze. He came from a *barrio* and his friends were tough, he said. Another tenant in the same building who gave me her version of the same event emphasized that the intruders had assumed that the residents of her building were “rich” based on the sharp contrast

between that building and the rest of the street. But in reality, she asserted, “we don’t have much more that they do.” The point I wish to make here is that, faced with the possibility of being mistaken for “yuppies” or “rich,” Eduardo and his neighbors relied on the protection of the police—the particular police introduced to guarantee their safety in a hostile neighborhood—and thus effectively emphasized their “standing out.”

Pedro’s notice, with which I opened this chapter, performed this same move. “If you catch anyone damaging this public space report it to Culture Space’s security,” he wrote, asserting that he possessed the power to conjure the force of the police. In fact, both Eduardo’s story and Pedro’s notice disclosed that the police enabled the rescue as well as new residents place in it. Their invocation of the police appeared to be at once the condition for the “all of us” of Pedro’s notice and the betrayal of its impossibility. It fragmented the “we” between those who can mobilize the police, those who don’t possess such power, and those against whom the police can be mobilized.

And yet it seems that the artists were incapable of properly locating the police, just as they were incapable of properly locating the neighbor and the menacing other. Let us recall the references to police ineffectiveness and corruption that we have encountered throughout the chapter. In my first conversation with Pedro, he talked about them as insufficiently or improperly trained to handle “the situation.” In Bernardo’s recollection of various attacks on and robberies of residents of renovated buildings the police appeared to be complicit with the criminals, indeed, to be offering them protection. In Eduardo’s story they were unable, or unwilling, to enter the *vecindad*. In the eyes of the artists, then, the police’s relation to both the neighbors and the rescue appeared to be rather ambiguous, which emphasized both their anxiety over misrecognition and their



anticipation of threat.

### **Graffiti and Urine**

During one of my last visits to Eduardo's building, around the time when Pedro placed his NOTICE in the *callejón*, I found scribbles of undecipherable graffiti on the entrance door. I was there to visit Omar, who had been dismissed from Culture Space a few months before due to an internal restructuring of the organization. Omar saw the graffiti as a clear sign that the hostility towards his building was resurging after having significantly receded in the previous months and, like his fellow tenants, believed that his building could not do away with security services. But he attributed this sudden reappearance of hostility to Culture Space's decision to discontinue providing workshops for local inhabitants.

In the year and a half since its opening, the cultural center had undergone a gradual but drastic transformation. Most of the artists whom Bernardo had invited to work there had been dismissed and Bernardo himself had resigned. The eclecticism of the space had gradually given way to a more formal exhibition space, and some of its staff's goal of positioning Culture Space within the city's contemporary art circuit seemed to have triumphed. The community program had also changed in this restructuring. It had moved from a wide array of handcraft, theater, writing and music workshops at very low prices to a one yearlong, twice weekly and more expensive art workshop for children, to none at all, when the program was reduced to monthly field trips and special events for neighboring families. Pedro, partly responsible for this restructuring, interpreted the graffiti that was now appearing in the *callejón*, as well as the urine at its entrance, in a

similar manner. The “neighbors” were angry.

But Omar and Pedro’s concerns over such manifestations of anger and resentment captured a deeper anxiety that saturates all the fleeting and not so fleeting interactions that I have discussed in this chapter, an anxiety about the unredeemable nature of the inhabitants of the historic center, which destabilized the “all of us” of Pedro’s notice. Such concerns seemed to express that “they” could not be proper subjects capable of inhabiting a modern, cosmopolitan public space, which in turn undermined the artists’ own claims to a cosmopolitan present. Moreover, Omar and Pedro’s concerns over graffiti, urine and trash captured the dual sense of mis/recognition that I have suggested is taking place in the historic center. It is as if the weight of history that bears upon the social interactions I discussed allowed for only two positions, crystallizing an unstable “us” and a “them”. Let us recall one of the voices in Culture Space’s cacophony: “I feel like a Franciscan monk doing the work of the colonizers”. This voice suggests that since “we”—the artists—are not the “colonized”, we must be the “colonizers” (of the historic center). But it also suggests a profound disquiet with such a position. “We” should *not* be the “colonizers”. “We don’t have much more than they do”, said someone in relation to the break-in in Eduardo’s building. “I come from a barrio and have tough friends”, said Eduardo, dismayed to be mistaken for a yuppie. Mis/recognition, then, appears to slide towards a destabilizing sense of being recognized as the beneficiaries of rescue.

### Chapter 3: Racial Imaginaries and (Neo) Liberal Sensibilities

#### Introduction

Shortly after moving to the historic center, Bernardo hosted a party in his apartment, located on a busy and heavily traveled street near the cultural center where he worked. The party, however, ended abruptly before midnight, after an unexpected turn of events. This is how Bernardo narrated the story:

The day of my birthday party, I'm going to tell you why people left. There was an open bar and plenty of food.

And suddenly I'm told: "*hey*"—I was on the rooftop (...)—"the alcohol is finished, all of it."

And I say: "*no! It can't be, there were like a thousand bottles! Everything?*"

"*And besides there are some veeeery suspicious looking dudes with very bad vibes.*"

I arrive [downstairs], and yes, there were like fifteen tough guys IN MY APARTMENT! Like that, looking at everyone like that, [each] holding a full bottle.

[A friend says:] "*Enough Bernardo, throw them out, what's going on?*"

And I tell them: "*No! Why am I going to throw them out?*"

And someone says: "*but who invited them?*"

And I say: "*look my friend, I invited twenty and there are more than two hundred people here. They have the same right to be here as the curator [of an important Mexico City museum] who is over there and whom I didn't invite. I'm not going to throw them out. What if they're friends with the guy playing the music? (...) What if they come—because they do look darkish (morenitos) and kind of poor (pobretones)—but what if they're friends with the DJ and I kick them out? No way! No!*"

So all my friends left—because there was no alcohol, not for any other reason. (...) And [when the party was over the crashers] surrounded me, all of them.

[And one said:] *“What? You’re the owner of the house, right, man?”*

*“No. Well yes. So what?”*

*“Cool!”—they were from eleven-year old kids to forty year old guys, and the guy speaking was twenty-something. “Look we live in the two vecindades right next door. No one invited us. We heard music, came up, took your alcohol and you didn’t do anything. Instead, every time you walked in front of us you smiled and said cheers”—I swear Alejandra! —“Cool man, welcome to the barrio, that’s the attitude. (...) I’m respected around here. I’m el Giovanni. If one day someone does something to you just tell them, I’m Giovanni’s friend, because you are now my friend, man.”*

He hugs me and says cool. And they leave. Any reasonable being would have said: *“Who are you? Get out.”* Not me.

And from then on, every time I walk by them they whistle or nod. But I keep on walking. I’m not interested in stopping to have beers with them, because surely they would [start to] come up [to my place] whenever. I’m not an asshole. But no. The trial by fire, which was that I arrived with an open doors attitude, you steal my alcohol and I even say cheers, made me enter (Interview with author, September 14, 2006).

Like other interactions with *vecindad* dwellers that I discussed in Chapter 2, Bernardo’s story exudes concern over location and mis/recognition. The problem is not that his party is permeable. The fact that he invited twenty people and more than two hundred showed up appears as taken-for-granted, almost banal. Spreading the word about a party and showing up with friends and friends of friends is neither uncommon nor objectionable in his social circles; in fact, it is often the norm. But some of the uninvited guests appear to be out of place: they are aggressive, they have taken all the alcohol for themselves and they look “darkish and kind of poor.” They stand apart. Thus Bernardo’s friends ask him—as the host and presumably as someone who by living in the historic center knows how to handle the situation—to throw out the intruders. But he refuses to occupy the position to which his friends appeal, namely, that of the one who excludes. At the same time he also fulfills their hopes, positing himself as an authority figure who

knows how to handle such difficult, potentially explosive situations, even if in quite a different manner than the one they had perhaps foreseen.

To be sure, parties in Bernardo's social circles are generally thought of and talked about as open events. But of course, such openness inevitably rests on the assumption of social exclusion or, in other words, on the presupposition that people like Giovanni will not show up (as guests).<sup>1</sup> Yet while Bernardo's friends would defend these boundaries against transgression, convinced as they are that the intruders should be thrown out, Bernardo seems to conflate the inclusiveness of the party with the ostensible openness of public space: he declares that Giovanni and his entourage should be as welcome as an important curator who showed up uninvited. It is in fact their "right." In other words, Bernardo presents his refusal to throw the intruders out as an imperative not to discriminate: either he applies the same treatment to all uninvited guests or he accepts all in the party. Evoking a right as actually distributed equally among all members of society, he positions himself as a restrained and tolerant subject.<sup>2</sup> And yet, Bernardo is far from establishing social equivalence between the curator and the crashers, and his openness runs into its limits. While welcoming the latter into his home Bernardo simultaneously marks them as "suspicious looking" and as "darkish and kind of poor," indexing not only the perception of lower social status but also of menace and, as we shall see, incommensurability.

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<sup>1</sup> This openness encounters its limits at the same place where the inclusiveness of the Habermasian public sphere, with its bourgeois space and sensibilities and its ultimately situated rationality, also comes to a halt.

<sup>2</sup> Here I follow Povinelli's discussion of the limits of liberalism in Australia. See: Povinelli, E. A. (2002). The cunning of recognition : indigenous alterities and the making of Australian multiculturalism. Durham, Duke University Press.

But besides a logic of non-discrimination, there is another logic traversing the story, one of patron-client relations, where people are bound to each other in intimate relations of hierarchical dependency. In order to understand how this logic *also* pervades Bernardo's rendering of the party as an inclusive yet highly differentiated space we must first locate it in the context of the unusual residential contiguity between different social classes brought about by the rescue, which made the interaction possible in the first place. For Bernardo's appeal to inclusion is informed by his perception of the historic center as a *barrio*—a space of intimate social relations where everybody knows each other—as well as by his own uncertain position within this socio-spatial universe. Indeed, as I discussed in Chapter 2, Bernardo and other artist's who lived and worked in this area, viewed the *barrio* as a homogeneous, close-knit community with unwritten rules and codes of conduct that were seemingly unknown to outsiders.

Bernardo, a performance artist and cultural promoter working for Slim's Foundation, liked to cultivate a self-image of transgression. An excellent storyteller, and always a performer, he often told anecdotes about his encounters with the “marginal characters” of the center, and insisted that, in order to live there, one must command a particular attitude. During the same interview Bernardo illustrated this point through an incident that took place a few months before the party. An art curator who used to live across the hall from his apartment was assaulted and robbed one night right outside their building. Despite the man's disheveled appearance (“he was always wearing torn jeans, glasses; he came in and out, without luxuries, good vibe...”) his aggressors called him “pretty boy” (*niño bonito*), an expression with class as well as racialized connotations. In contrast, Bernardo claimed that he had never been assaulted in such a way in the fourteen

years that he had worked and (more recently) lived in the historic center. Why? Because of his attitude:

The *barrio* immediately knows what the deal is. They might see me wearing a suit and a tie and I might speak with a lot of refinement, but I radiate [the right attitude]. I don't pretend. It is not a mask, as in yes, I'm super tough. No! I'm like that. I love it and people perceive it (Interview with author, September 14, 2006).

Bernardo suggests that despite his disheveled appearance his neighbor could not hide the social identity that his attitude betrayed. In contrast, verbal refinement and formal clothes notwithstanding, he knows how to conduct himself in the *barrio* and thus he manages to be welcome there. He claims to possess an ability to talk to and negotiate with Giovanni, the latter understood as a local character or social type, not merely a particular individual. This renders him an apt mediator who can move across social boundaries. In other words, Bernardo enacts a patron-client relation of proximity and distance that connects him to Giovanni while reasserting their social differences. We shall see shortly that this spatial relation reflects a temporal one. For now, let us emphasize that in maintaining this tension, Bernardo oscillates between a discourse of anonymity and equal rights and a discourse of personal relations and negotiation (DaMatta 1991). Bernardo welcomes Giovanni into his home and in return Giovanni, who knows the *barrio*, its characters and its rules, a knowledge precluded from Bernardo, offers protection and “friendship,” though preferably from a distance.

That Giovanni keeps on nodding when Bernardo walks by, however, appears at once as reassuring recognition, indeed, securing Bernardo's place within the space of the *barrio*, and as the menacing possibility of the distance between them collapsing. Bernardo's insistence that one must keep on walking suggests an incommensurable

difference between the suspicious and menacing characters and himself. This incommensurability is construed not only in terms of class position—they are “kind of poor”—but also of skin color—they are *morenitos*. The characterization of the intruders as “darkish and kind of poor” thus becomes a significant marker of difference. In fact, as I will argue in this chapter, this interaction is saturated with racial anxiety and haunted by the racial imaginary of the Indian, a highly charged and ambivalent figure in Mexico. As such, the interaction reenacts long-standing racial tensions that, while disavowed by the dominant national narrative of *mestizaje* and national belonging, have been inscribed at the heart of the nation and have long saturated everyday social relations in Mexico City.

In this chapter I explore two interrelated historical trajectories that coalesce in the racial tensions that, I will show, saturate Bernardo’s narrative. The first concerns the ambivalent location of the Indian in the national imaginary: at once the very essence of the *mestizo* nation and that which hinders progress and modernity. The second concerns relations of proximity and distance between social classes in the unequal urban landscape of Mexico City. These relations, I argue, have been informed by a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion epitomized in the “good” and “the bad” urban masses (Lomnitz 2001).

### **Race, Racism and Racial Imaginaries**

Like many other scholars, Deborah Poole has argued that race is an inherently unstable and ambiguous concept, with wide variations across academic disciplines and national histories. According to Poole it is precisely this ambiguity that gives the concept of race “its singular power to mobilize older social prejudices and modes of understanding difference, reworking them to fit the exigencies of changing social and



political landscapes—always present but never quite the same” (Poole 2004: 39). In Mexico, as we shall see, the ambiguity of race goes even further, to the point that it is often unclear whether “race” is at all present. I propose to use the term racial imaginary to grasp the multiple and elusive meanings of race in Mexico, which exceed notions of innate biological difference and phenotypic characteristics. My approach draws on Marisol de la Cadena’s argument that “race” antedates its emergence as a modern category of differentiation or, in other words, that it is composed of “multiple pasts and many conceptual memories,” as well as on her insistence that “race” comes to life in translation, that is, “in relations where meanings only partially coincide, but where excesses, even if disturbing, continue to circulate” (De la Cadena 2009: 12, my translation).

While the racial imaginaries that interest me encompass “visual” traits like physical appearance and skin color, they involve “non-visual” elements as well, such as cultural dispositions, intellectual capabilities or moral attributes and sensibilities. Far from unusual, as Ann Stoler (1997) has argued, the interdependence between “visual” and “non-visual” criteria in understandings of race is in fact central to all racial systems. Based on research in the archives of Dutch colonialism, Stoler claims that the emergence of race as a modern, scientific concept that organized biological difference into evolutionary schemes was inseparable from ideas of race as a set of moral attributes. It provided European imperial powers with a scientific language with which to classify and govern the “morally inferior” natives. Therefore, Stoler stresses the centrality of “non-visual and non-somatic-cultural competencies” such as personality traits and

psychological dispositions, in the definition of racial membership.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Stoler argues that the force of the non-visual rests on “the political effectiveness of a system of social classification that appears fixed, permanent, and commonsensical while it remains porous and pliable” (p. 104).

Stoler’s argument sheds light on how dominant understandings of race as a primarily biological and visual system of differentiation silence other trajectories of race and, it follows from this, other forms of racism. A commonsensical observation in Latin America, for instance, is that “racism” is not a problem in a region where discrimination is based on other criteria of social difference, such as culture or class.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as opposed to the United States, where race is popularly perceived as a set of innate and immutable biological differences and, moreover, as a white/black dichotomy, in Latin America “race” is only loosely associated to biology. As de la Cadena has argued:

[A person’s] assigned racial “color” does not necessarily correspond to [his or her] skin [color]. It also depends on the quality of the individual. (...) In Latin American categories phenotype comes in and out; whiteness can be attained by social processes. It is obvious that the logic is not the same for all “colors.” They have a history and the association between color and quality depends on this history (De la Cadena 2009: 24).

In this regard, understandings of race in the region oscillate between “biological essence, historical genealogy, cultural identity, and national foundation” (Poole 2004). In this chapter I aim to elucidate, again following Stoler, the manner in which racial

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard Stoler’s article challenges academic debates that have posited that “new” forms of racism rely on “cultural” distinctions (or on the racialization of culture) whereas “old” forms of racism relied on beliefs of fixed somatic traits, and hence the assumption that “new” racisms are more subtle and yet more pervasive.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the disavowal of racism in Latin America see: De la Cadena, M. (2001). “Reconstructing Race. Racism, Culture and Mestizaje in Latin América.” NACLA Report on the Americas 34(6): 16-23, Lomnitz, C. (2005). “Mexico’s Race Problem.” Boston Review.

imaginaries in Mexico inform how people “affectively distinguish themselves from others in the world.” In other words, I aim to analyze how, in pervading everyday, sometimes intimate encounters between social groups, such as the interaction narrated by Bernardo, racial imaginaries—and specifically the imaginary of the “Indian”—inform people’s senses of self and of social and political belonging.

### **Mexico as a *Mestizo* Nation, or, the Racial Imaginaries of *Mestizaje***

Let me start this genealogical inquiry from the present. Leon Krauze, a popular young newspaper commentator and host of a radio talk show, recently wrote a piece in his weekly column that provides an illuminating introduction to how racial imaginaries circulate and permeate quotidian interactions in Mexico City, as well as to the ways in which racism is discussed in public discourse. In what he described as a “painful” incident, while playing a friendly soccer match against a team of teenagers, and after a rough move, a boy from the rival team loudly and resentfully yelled “fucking Indian!” at one of Krauze’s teammates. After the tension receded, Krauze approached the young man’s coach to express his concern about such reprehensible behavior, to which the coach replied that it was common—and no big deal—to use those words in the soccer field. Dismayed, Krauze later posed a question to the audience of his talk show: “Since when is the word Indian used as an insult in our country?” (Krauze 2009)

Never, he wrote, had the show received so many phone calls and electronic messages. Most among the audience expressed indignation at such a racist slur, but some showed resignation, arguing that the phrase was quite common and no cause for alarm. One interlocutor argued that the word Indian had started to acquire a negative

connotation since the conquest, and that instead of diminishing, the derogatory associations of the term have increased over time. “I immediately made a reference to *mestizaje* as a counter argument,” wrote Krauze. “How to explain the attenuating effect that the incomparable (and undeniable) racial mixture in Mexico should have had [on racism]?” The interlocutor, in turn, replied that *mestizaje* continues to have a most interesting “sociological effect:” it seems to be valued only when the result is “a blond person with white skin... very sad.”

The “Indian” that appears in Krauze’s piece exceeds any particular sociological group, as well as the significations of its academic and political iterations. In fact, when the teenager yells “Fucking Indian” in the soccer field, or perhaps more importantly when Krauze and his audience discuss the incident in the radio show, they mobilize a racial imaginary that evokes different and interlacing conceptual memories (De la Cadena 2009). The “Indian” indexes a negative and violent nature in the other player, a latent attribute that becomes apparent at a particular moment during the interaction. That is to say, by failing to play properly and to follow the rules of the game, the other discloses the “Indian” in him. Shocked by such a construction, Krauze expresses a widespread understanding of *mestizaje* as a long-term historical process through which distinct racial groups, especially Spaniards and Indians, have mixed to become *mestizos*, that is, modern and racially unmarked Mexicans.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he voices a normative dimension of this national narrative, namely, that by integrating “the Indian” Mexico has effectively

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<sup>5</sup> According to Mexico’s official history the country lived an extraordinary and successful process of *mestizaje* throughout the 19th and especially the 20th centuries. Indians and Europeans gradually melded into a new racial and cultural type that embodies the greatness of the pre-Hispanic civilizations while at the same time partaking in Western modern culture. For a discussion on *mestizaje* and racism see: Navarrete, F. (2004). *Las relaciones interétnicas en México*. México. D.F., UNAM.

eliminated racism.

Indeed, Mexico has long prided itself on being morally superior to other countries with regards to racial issues. As opposed to the United States, so goes this conventional wisdom, Mexico didn't exterminate or segregate its indigenous population but instead successfully integrated them into the national whole (Lomnitz 2005). Moreover, to the extent that racism has started to be recognized as a problem in public debate since the turn to "multiculturalism" in the early 1990s—and especially in the aftermath of the Zapatista indigenous rebellion—it has largely been discussed in relation to indigenous populations (Dawson 2004). But the "racism" that pervades social relations between *mestizos*, as evident in Krauze's piece, has only recently become a matter of public debate.<sup>6</sup>

While reproducing these normative assumptions about *mestizaje* and race in Mexico, Krauze's editorial also exposes their limits. First, he presents his question about the derogatory use of the term Indian in a rhetorical manner, inasmuch as what prompts his reflections in the first place is precisely the pervasive and commonplace use of the negative associations of the Indian, of which he is no doubt aware. Second, he lets his interlocutor present his counterarguments as self-evident or common knowledge: the term Indian has always had negative connotations and although we are all *mestizo*, "whiteness" continues to be a privileged position and an aspiration, seemingly what we would all like to be.

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<sup>6</sup> In recent years several Mexican films have addressed the violence of class and racialized difference in Mexico, focusing particularly on Mexico City's landscape of inequality. See, for example: Fernando Sariñana's "All the power" (1999); Luis Estrada's "A Wonderful World" (2006); Carlos Reygadas' "Battle in Heaven" (2007); Gael García Bernal's *Deficit* (2007); Rodrigo Pla's "La Zona" (2007).

Undeterred, Krauze finishes his text with a pedagogical note:

¿Who should bear the responsibility to end the tendency to discriminate and to be intolerant at the dawn of the twenty-first century? I suppose that it must be the parents. But in the meantime, tomorrow I have another match. I will bring this article and the recording of the radio show to the young man. Perhaps, one day, far from the heat of the soccer field, he will reconsider [his position]. Part of Mexico's future, a future anchored in tolerance and equality, depends on it (Krauze 2009).

Krauze's piece thus reveals the endurance of the national narrative of *mestizaje* as well as its contemporary fissures and "multicultural" re-articulations. In his rendition, *mestizaje* should not exclude difference. Quite the contrary, for him tolerance of difference in a framework of equality is an indispensable prerequisite for Mexico to fully inhabit the twenty-first century. The persistence of intolerance, he argues, is a preoccupying impediment for Mexico's arrival to the future. But Krauze's pedagogical ending also discloses another crucial shift in contemporary Mexico, namely the fact that it is not the responsibility of the state to inculcate such civic, modern virtues, but of the family as well as of people like Krauze himself, enlightened intellectuals, a task that he would undertake with the racist and intolerant teenager. And in this shift we find traces of three decades of neo-liberal transformations, in the context of which the state has ceased to be the quintessential modernizing agent and instead has been construed as an obstacle to be overcome, a topic to which I will return in Chapter 4.

Krauze's call to fight discrimination and intolerance resonates with Bernardo's appeal to Giovanni's right to being in his party. For it is my argument that both Krauze and Bernardo share a political subjectivity that is informed by the circulation of (neo)liberal idioms of citizenship and political belonging in contemporary Mexico. As I discussed in the introduction through the work of Nikolas Rose (1996; 1999), besides

traditional liberal ideals of individual liberty and equality, these idioms emphasize personal responsibility and an ethical commitment to actively participate in the life of one's community.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Krauze and Bernardo partake of an age-old elite anxiety that something intrinsically wrong with Mexico has prevented liberal values and modernity from firmly taking root, that "underdevelopment" in fact constitutes a chronic national disease.

In other words, Mexico's cultural elites again agonize over an image of *el pueblo* as being unfit for the demands of the present. Krauze's editorial piece indeed partakes of these anxieties. The notice addressing the deterioration of the *callejón*, which I discussed in Chapter 2, expressed similar concerns. It captured Pedro's preoccupation over the fact that, by using a newly renovated space as their dumping ground, the "neighbors" of the historic center showed themselves as lacking the civic virtues necessary for properly inhabiting public space. For Krauze the un-modern kernel of Mexican subjectivity is not the "Indian" but the bigotry that this figure condenses, as represented by the intolerant teenager. It is the intellectual's task to instruct the latter into the virtues of civility and respect. And yet the figure of the "Indian" also appears as an obstacle in Krauze: perhaps some day the teenager will understand, but perhaps he cannot, as there might be something intrinsically wrong with him. In the case of Bernardo's narrative the racial imaginary of the Indian pervades both the moment of recognition (that is, the gesture of hospitality that is reciprocated by a gesture of protection) *and* the assertion of an incommensurable difference between himself and Giovanni. In other words, both

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of 19th Century Mexican liberalism see: Hale, C. A. (1972). El liberalismo mexicano en la época de Mora, 1821-1853. México, D.F., Siglo XXI

Krauze's editorial and Bernardo's narrative reveal enduring racial tensions and conflicting temporalities—for, as we shall now see, they are highly temporalized—at the heart of the *mestizo* national subject.

### **The Temporalities of the *Mestizo*, or, Can Mexicans Become Modern?**

The *mestizo* became the ideal national subject after the revolution of 1910-1917. A particular racial category that existed since colonial times to designate mixed bloods, and more concretely the offspring of Spanish and Indian parents, it was placed by late nineteenth century intellectuals and by revolutionary and post-revolutionary ideologues at the very center of Mexican nationalism and, inseparably, of Mexican history.<sup>8</sup> What distinguished this post-revolutionary *mestizo* was that he was neither European nor Indian, but rather embodied a racially and culturally unified and forward-looking nation, one that would be capable of fully inhabiting a cosmopolitan present and thus of playing as equal in the international field (Lomnitz 2001).

Post-revolutionary intellectuals saw the “Indian problem,” which had preoccupied liberal elites throughout the previous century, as an unresolved and enduring challenge to national integration (Knight 1990: 84). Indeed, the Indian continued to trigger deep-seated anxieties about racial and cultural difference, which became ever more salient against the specter of revolutionary violence.<sup>9</sup> According to Manuel Gamio, one of the

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<sup>8</sup> There were, of course, multiple positions within what I'm conflating into the term “revolutionary and post-revolutionary intellectuals,” and, moreover, their positions and levels of influence changed over time. Instead of presenting a detailed discussion of these different ideas my aim is to present a general picture of two important themes that pervade post-revolutionary (and also 19th century) debates about national unity and the national subject, namely, the “Indian problem” and Mexico's standing in the international scene.

<sup>9</sup> This at a time when, by official estimates, only one third of the population continued to be “pure” Indian while 59 percent were classified as *mestizo*, a result of centuries of miscegenation between Europeans,



main architects of post-revolutionary nationalism:

The problem is not in avoiding the illusory collective aggressiveness of certain indigenous groups but in channeling their energies, which are currently dispersed, attracting their members towards the other social group that they have always considered as enemies, incorporating them, building on them, tending finally to create a coherent homogeneous national race, unified in language and convergent in culture” (Quoted in Buffington 2000: 141).

While prevalent racial theories propounded the degenerative tendencies of miscegenation (Gustav Le Bon was the most famous representative of this view), Latin American elites made of racial mixing the basis for their own integration into proper historical time. Influenced by the cultural relativism of Franz Boas, Gamio advocated the revalorization of Indians as a constitutive part of the nation.<sup>10</sup> But the “Indian” who entered the national equation after the revolution was an ambivalent figure, and his ambivalence echoed nineteenth century scientific racist views and colonial imaginaries alike. The Indian was at certain moments construed as belonging to a degraded and servile race and therefore as standing in need of salvation, and at other moments as dignified, proud, industrious and naturally “pure.” He was at the same time

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indigenous groups, and to a lesser extent blacks. These statistical estimates were, to be sure, highly contested, and Gamio himself advocated the classification of the peasant inhabitants of Central Mexico who had played an important role in the Zapatista movement during the revolution as Indian. What such statistics also reveal, as pointed out by Alan Knight and as already implied by Ann Stoler, is that “racial” identification was not only based on “biological” attributes, but on a wide array of elements such as language, dress, religion, and social organization. Navarrete, F. (2004). *Las relaciones interétnicas en México*. México. D.F., UNAM. Knight, A. (1990). *Racism, Revolution and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910-1940. The Idea of Race in Latin America 1870-1940*. R. Graham. Austin, University of Texas, p. 73-74

<sup>10</sup> The positing of things Indian as the authentic source of the nation was not a post-revolutionary invention. Since early colonial times a specifically Creole, that is American born Spaniard, collective identity began to take shape around the glorification of the land and the great pre-Columbian civilizations, especially the Aztecs. By the beginning of the 19th century this pre-Columbian past had become a sort of “classical antiquity,” but it was not viewed as bearing any connection to living Indians. Gamio himself played a crucial role in establishing such a connection. See: Lopez Caballero, P. (2008). “Which heritage for which heirs? The pre-Columbian past and the colonial legacy in the national history of Mexico.” *Social Anthropology* 16(3): 329-345.

“incommensurably other,” the past that prevented progress, and the embodiment of Mexico’s very essence (Poole 2004: 37-38).

At the center of the post-revolutionary project to domesticate both racial difference and the threat of popular violence were questions of temporality and modernity. Indeed, a temporal relation between past and future has been spatialized in Mexico as elsewhere in terms of inwards (the Indian) and outwards (the international scene or, more precisely, the global North). A crucial preoccupation of nineteenth century elites had been how to attain the level of evolution of the United States and Europe, that is, how to participate as equals and contemporaries in the international theater and thus become subjects of universal history. But Mexico inhabited an interstitial space, outside of universal time and history and yet not fully “other” vis-à-vis Europe and the United States, that is, vis-à-vis “civilized” nations. Race, then, provided these elites with a vocabulary for measuring their region’s proximity and/or distance to “Europe.”<sup>11</sup> In this sense, evolutionary temporality of the racial question has been mapped onto spatial relations of North and South, outside and inside, distance and proximity.

But the advent of race as a scientific, measurable datum in late nineteenth century Mexico interwove with earlier colonial imaginaries where “race” (which was based on decent and not on biological attributes and hence could not be read out of the body) referred to the moral quality of persons and their (in)ability to be civilized (De la Cadena, 2009, p. 26).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, nineteenth century liberals blamed the backwardness of Mexico

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of 19th Century scientific racism in Mexico see: Tenorio-Trillo, M. (1996). Mexico at the world's fairs: crafting a modern nation. Berkeley, University of California Press.

<sup>12</sup> Laura Lewis offers an illuminating discussion of colonial racial hierarchies, part of the conceptual memory of race in Mexico. She stresses the ambiguity of the concept of *casta* as Spanish colonizers used it

and the impossibility to “catch up” partly on the Indian as an inherently inferior race and partly on Spanish colonialism, which, they claimed, with its centuries of oppression, exploitation and obscurantism had created a servile, indolent and vicious population (Lomnitz 2001). For some, the only solution was to counter the negative traits of Indians by importing European immigrants. For other liberals like Juárez, of indigenous origin himself, who succeeded in unifying the country in the face of French imperialist occupation in the second half of the nineteenth century and subsequently served multiple terms as its president, Indians could and indeed should ascend to the level of Europeans through education, universal rights and equality.<sup>13</sup>

The “Indian” thus condensed the anxieties of Mexican elites about their own spatial and temporal place in modernity, understood as essentially European-American, and hence foreign.<sup>14</sup> However, the European foreign represented not only an unachievable ideal but also a threat in the form of colonialism and (American) expansionism. Indeed,

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in New Spain. Its meaning prefigured modern notions of race, as it referred to descent as well as to distinctions determined by blood and skin color. But unlike race as it came to be defined in the “Anglo-West,” the term *casta* did not refer to supposedly unambiguous biological differences. Lewis defines caste as an integrated system of relations and dispositions, and colonial society as a “fluid pyramid” with Spanishness most associated with the Spanish elite at the top, Indianess most associated with the masses of Indian commoners at the bottom, and interstitial spaces most fully inhabited by blacks, mulattoes and *mestizos* at various points in between.” Lewis, L. A. (2003). *Hall of mirrors power, witchcraft, and caste in colonial Mexico*. Durham, Duke University Press: xiv, 262 p.

<sup>13</sup> In effect, however, indigenous communities lost the communal rights they had enjoyed during colonial times. Toward the end of the 19th century, and especially under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and the influence of scientific racism, modernization became the self-professed objective of the regime, indicating not only capitalist industrialization but also the dispossession of Indian communities and the waging of wars against rebellious Indians. See: Knight, A. (1990). *Racism, Revolution and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910-1940. The Idea of Race in Latin America 1870-1940*. R. Graham. Austin, University of Texas, Lomnitz, C. (2001). *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>14</sup> Here I echo Chakrabarty’s use of the term in its “hyper real” sense, that is, as a figure of the imagination, the scene of the birth of the modern, whose geographical correlation remains somewhat indeterminate. Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

much like the Indian, the European foreign has had ambivalent connotations as simultaneously desired and dreaded in Mexico.<sup>15</sup> If for nineteenth century liberals the threat of the foreign was to be domesticated by disavowing Mexico's Indian—atavistic and backward—elements and fully embracing Mexico's European roots, post-revolutionary elites posited a similar domestication in the imagined synthesis of the *mestizo*. Modern Mexican time would be neither “European” nor “Indian” but *mestizo*.<sup>16</sup> Yet the *mestizo* too appeared as an inferior racial subject vis-à-vis the European. His power instead rested on his adaptability to the particular conditions of his environment. More than anything then, as Mauricio Tenorio has argued, the positing of the *mestizo* as the national subject, especially in the writings of Andrés Molina Enríquez, reflected, so to speak, a coming to terms with an already established national reality. Whether they wanted it or not, Mexican elites had to contend with the fact that Mexico was, at best from their perspective, a *mestizo* nation (Tenorio, 2009: 48-49).

The simultaneously dreaded and idealized Indian was thus displaced to the outside—forever the excluded other—and at the same time inscribed at the very heart of

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<sup>15</sup> Ana Maria Alonso has argued that the racialized identities of Mexican elites—and of Latin American elites more generally—cannot be reduced to “European” or “white,” as they have in turn been racialized as “non-European” in Europe and the United States. Alonso, A. M. (2004). “Conforming Disconformity: “Mestizaje,” Hybridity and the Aesthetics of Mexican Nationalism.” *Cultural Anthropology* 19(4): 459-490.

<sup>16</sup> Critics of post-revolutionary racial ideologies argue that people like Gamio and Vasconcelos failed in their efforts to break with the blatant racism of their predecessors as well as with the influence of European racist thought, especially social Darwinism and Spencerian evolutionism, which posited the Indian as an inferior race and linked it to a degraded moral character. Although they restored—or rather created—a connection between living Indians and pre-Hispanic civilizations, positing them as an equal or at times better “race,” critics stress that Gamio and others held on to the idea that races are discreet biological entities associated with particular moral attributes. See: Dawson, A. S. (2004). *Indian and nation in revolutionary Mexico*. Tucson, University of Arizona Press, Navarrete, F. (2004). *Las relaciones interétnicas en México*. México. D.F., UNAM, Tenorio Trillo, M. (2009). *Del Mestizaje a un siglo de Andrés Molina Enríquez. En busca de Molina Enríquez: cien años de Los grandes problemas nacionales*. E. Kourí. México, D.F., El Colegio de México: 33-64.

the *mestizo* national subject, which remained constitutively split between conflicting temporalities. The Indian emerged as the quintessential other against which the contours of a modern national collective were drawn, while at the same time it continued to haunt *mestizo* aspirations to modernity.<sup>17</sup> One is indeed reminded here of Roger Bartra's argument in *The Cage of Melancholy* (1992) that post-Revolutionary intellectuals "created a formidable myth in which the Mexicans carry the Indian, the barbarian, the savage, or the child like a homunculus within them. But the homunculus is shattered" (p. 77). For example, in 1934 Samuel Ramos, the foremost representative of a literature concerned with defining the national character, discussed the disquieting proposition that traces of the Indian were indelibly inscribed at the very heart of the *mestizo* national subject:

It must be supposed that the Indian has had an influence on the soul of the other Mexican groups (the *mestizos* and whites living in the city); of course, because he has mixed his blood with them. (...) The Indian is like those substances called "catalytic," which provoke chemical reactions just by their presence. No Mexican thing can be subtracted from this influence, because the indigenous substance (*masa indígena*) is a thick element that covers everything in the country (Ramos 1934: 78, my translation).

Recasting the figure of the Indian, Ramos claimed that the *pelado*—the urban rabble—was the exemplary Mexican, a primitive, violent and resentful figure, not quite at home in urban modernity (Ibid: 71-72). But the Indian that endured in Ramos' *pelado*

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<sup>17</sup> In "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead" Žizek argues that more than a series of shared values, national unity involves the myths, practices and forms of identification—which he calls the Nation-Thing—around which the members of a national collectivity organize their enjoyment (in Lacanian terminology). The contours and contents of the Nation-Thing are always drawn in relation to an Other, which personifies a threat to "our" enjoyment. But according to Žizek what is at stake in this fear of the Other is the traumatic fact that "we never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us: the lack (castration) is original." Žizek thus moves the discussion of the Lacanian constitutive lack of the subject and the fact that desire is always desire of the other to the level of the nation and to the problematic of national belonging and identification. Žizek, S. (1990). "Eastern Europe's Republic's of Gilead". [\*New Left Review\*](#).

had forever lost its moorings in local traditions and in an idealized countryside. Indeed, the *mestizo* as *pelado* was quintessentially an urban figure. According to Bartra:

“[The *pelado*] is really a figure that has lost its traditions and lives in the context, still unfamiliar to him, of the urban industrial world. (...) He is trapped and therefore potentially violent and dangerous. His traditional spirit has been ruined, and in his heart modern cadences are not yet heard. (...) Hence the violence energy that he generates, which must be harnessed to create the cosmic race, to fortify the impoverished nation, to destroy the colonialist, to mold the revolutionary proletariat” (Bartra 1992: 91).

Ramos’ representation of the *pelado* as a racialized other, indeed, a fallen Indian, resonates with a long history of racialization of the urban poor in Mexico City (expressed in such iconic figures as the *lépero* in the nineteenth century, or the contemporary *naco*), about which I will have more to say in the next section. But as national subject the *pelado* was to be redeemed by a modernizing state. While he stood for the urban rabble, the dreaded masses, he also represented *el pueblo* emerged from the revolution, and the utopian fantasies that it had unleashed. He stood as the subject of a strong, corporatist and modernizing state, which would channel, civilize and control him, while at the same time correcting persistent social imbalances and inequalities (Knight, 1990). In other words, through the tutelage of the post-revolutionary state the *pelado* would eventually be able to domesticate his “Indian” impulses and become a fully-fledged modern subject (Lomnitz 2001: 74).

Tenorio (2009) has argued that the translation of this ideology of *mestizaje* into a post-revolutionary welfare state crucially disavowed the strong racial content—and the racial anxieties—that had saturated debates about national unity and the national subject. But *mestizaje* entailed not only the incorporation of the Indian into the *mestizo* national subject, but also of the figure of the *catrín*, a figure associated with a luxurious and

cosmopolitan lifestyle. Indeed, to paraphrase Monsivaís, the elites no longer saw themselves as *criollo* (of Spanish descent) but as “developmentalist” (Monsiváis 1995). It was precisely such disavowal, enabled by the post-revolutionary state’s capacity to integrate different class interests into its corporate structures as well as by its social programs—from land redistribution to popular education to social housing or a national public health system—that made a national “we” viable in the post-revolutionary era.<sup>18</sup> Tenorio indeed claims that the social history of *mestizaje*, which remains to be written, is a history of the welfare state, that is, of public health and social security. For the post-revolutionary state, as I discussed in the Introduction, was inscribed within the twentieth century political horizon of social citizenship. Public universities, for example, were spaces of interclass sociability, that is, *mestizo* spaces. All this provided meaningful content to the idea that “we are all *mestizo*,” despite entrenched class inequalities and pervasive racialized discrimination.

In other words, despite profound and persistent inequalities, post-revolutionary nationalism held the promise that the masses would eventually be “modernized,” that inequalities would, if not disappear, at least be reduced and that “we” would finally arrive at the future. But, as Lomnitz has argued (2001), starting in the 1980s—that is, in the context of Mexico’s turn to neoliberal policies and the state’s attenuation and eventual renouncement of its revolutionary rhetoric—such a model has gradually lost its viability and important fissures began to emerge. Two aspects of Lomnitz’s argument are especially important for my discussion. First, entrenched class (and racialized)

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the post-revolutionary state’s corporatist structure in Mexico City see: Davis, D. E. (1994). *Urban Leviathan: Mexico City in the twentieth century*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press.

differences and inequalities could no longer be disavowed or contained by the state. In other words, a rift emerged between the nation and the state, “creating an image of a state that is controlled by and used for the benefit of a thin and unpopular Americanizing elite that is overlain on a popular, Mexican nation” (p. 119). Second, in a context of economic crisis, shrinking state protections, increased labor precariousness, a proliferation of street “informality,” and heightened criminality, especially in large cities, the racialized masses, the urban *nacos*, began to again be represented by the elites as a threatening force, no longer redeemable by modernization. But, Lomnitz adds, there is yet another shift: While post-revolutionary nationalism posited the *pelado/naco* as not yet modern, indeed as in need of state tutelage and guidance, what transpires today is a racialized image of the Mexican as a whole “as not fully at home in modernity:”

[L]ike the colonial Indians, today’s *nacos* have not fully internalized their redemption, they are therefore unreliable moderns in the same way that Indians were unreliable Christians, and so the whole country is dyed with Indianess” (Ibid:114).

### **Racism without Race, or, *Güeros*, *Morenos* and *Nacos***

It is in light of this historical trajectory that we ought to analyze the subtle yet pervasive idioms of race that saturate quotidian interactions and inform entrenched forms of discrimination in Mexico City. They are evident, for example, in the advertisement of employment opportunities, where *buena presentación*—that is, good or proper appearance—is interpreted to mean lighter skin together with other class attributes such as certain notions of hygiene and appropriate dress. They are equally present in aesthetic categories that divide “beautiful” and “ugly” people, best exemplified in the common expressions “he is very handsome, blond and with blue eyes” or “she’s dark (*morena*) but



pretty” (Navarrete, 2004). But, as I have argued throughout this chapter, more than referring to “race” as a set of perceived immutable biological traits, these racializing idioms index one’s status as a “modern” subject, pointing to a series of moral attributes associated with modernity, from intelligence to responsibility or beauty, as well to one’s class position. In this sense, while “race” doesn’t appear or emerge as a problem for many Mexicans, the racial imaginary of the Indian permeates everyday social relations, and divides social space between “good” and “bad,” “ugly” and “pretty,” “decent” and “indecent,” “reliable” or “dangerous” in effect construing class differences in terms of racialized incommensurability.

Take, for example, Leonor’s continuous remarks about *vecindad* dwellers in Regina Street. A widow in her late fifties and comfortably middle class until the death of her husband a few years back, Leonor took a job as the cook and manager of Pedro’s bar (which she found through kinship ties with a member of Culture Space’s staff), in order to guarantee that her son could complete his private college education. Kind and affectionate, Leonor soon became a motherly figure for many regulars at the bar, always ready to give advice and to remind patrons not to drive while drunk. Like many new residents, she constantly made distinctions between the “good” and the “bad” among the poor and lower middle class residents of Regina, distinctions that, as I discussed in Chapter 2, were rather slippery. One day, for instance, as she offered to introduce me to a friend from her middle class residential neighborhood in the northern periphery of the city who had spent her childhood on Regina Street, Leonor clarified that “before” the inhabitants of the historic center were “decent and educated people,” in contrast to the present situation: “*ahora hay pura raza.*” Here the term *raza* resonated with *el pueblo* as

in the popular masses, and was used to negatively describe the attributes of the inhabitants of Regina and surrounding streets, poor, uneducated, coarse and ultimately violent.

Moreover, idioms of race serve as crucially mediating terms between different social groups. For instance, *güero* or *güerito* is a common form of address in urban public space, such as a street vendor addressing a potential customer by saying: “what can we offer you, güera?” (*que te damos güera?*). Such deployment often denotes a perceived class position of affluence, and yet the meaning of *güero* also contains a racializing dimension. In this second sense, it could be translated as “white” or “fair skinned.” Such deployment of *güero* in anonymous interaction introduces the interlocutors to the domain of personal relations and into a patron-client form of sociability. In other words, both the addressee and the speaker move from a space of presumed equality to the domain of racial and class hierarchies in Mexico and to a relation of proximity and distance, not unlike Bernardo and Giovanni at the party. But this is not always an innocuous operation. The artists and young professionals living in the historic center with whom I conducted my fieldwork felt that being perceived as *güeros* by the old inhabitants of the center enhanced their vulnerability to being attacked.

Consider a story narrated by Nancy, an art student who was one of the first to move into a renovated building in Regina Street and, having meanwhile relocated elsewhere, visited there regularly during my fieldwork. It is a story about two friends of hers who visited someone in Regina and were robbed and violently attacked outside a *vecindad* as they went out to buy beers late at night:

On their way back [from the store] about eight guys surrounded them, [and told

them] “give me everything you got, fucker,” and so they began to take out their things and they took their beers and [one of my friends] took off running, came here. [The other one] stayed by himself and told me that when he was ready to escape, they grabbed him by the waist, threw him on the floor, and started to kick him; they took his jacket, they took his wallet, took everything he had, and wanted to take him inside the *vecindad*, and yelled at him “pretty boy” [*bonito*], pretty boy, that’s what you get for being a pretty boy, fucker” and the guy is not even [a pretty boy], I mean, he’s darkish [*morenón*]. It is a resentment, “if you come to this building I’m going to fuck with you” (Interview with the author, January 21, 2007).

Nancy framed the violence towards her friends in terms of racialized class differences and resentments. That is, her friend was attacked for being “cute” and for visiting a renovated building, which, she felt, marked him as “rich” in the eyes of the attackers (as discussed in Chapter 2). At the same time, according to Nancy conventional notions of beauty (based on skin color and other racialized criteria) would not consider him a “pretty boy” at all. The problem then presented itself of why would the not-even-cute friend deserve such hatred. According to Nancy one could potentially be mistaken for someone one is not, becoming the unsuspecting victim of resentment. The story thus expressed both the persistence and slipperiness of racialized categories.

In order to better understand the anxieties over class and racial difference expressed in Nancy’s story, as well as in the incident narrated by Bernardo, we need to consider their specifically spatial dimension. In other words, we need to place them within the context of an unusual residential contiguity brought about by the rescue project between different social classes, and specifically between a young cultural elite and poor or lower-middle class tenement dwellers and street vendors. Indeed, precisely because of such particularity these events fall outside of the multiple but generally expected settings where middle and lower classes come together. They therefore generate their own,

particular relations of proximity and distance, encounter and mis/recognition, that bear the traces of this spatial urban history but which also exceed it.

### **Mixing and Unmixing in the City**

A birds-eye view of Mexico City would reveal a general pattern of residential segregation that started to take shape as the city began to outgrow its colonial boundaries in the late nineteenth century. According to this general geography, the majority of affluent areas are located in the South and West of the city, with better urban infrastructure and a higher concentration of services, educational and cultural institutions, green areas and heritage sites. In contrast, the city's poorest areas are located in the industrial North and East, generally more overcrowded and lacking adequate infrastructure, and in which the majority of the city's peripheral slums are concentrated (Ward 1998; Duhau 2003). However, a closer look at any given area would reveal a more complex pattern of proximity and distance between social classes.

To begin with, throughout the city we find pockets of wealth and poverty, where different groups live in close, even contiguous, but always contrasting spaces (Duhau 2003: 178).<sup>19</sup> But more importantly for our discussion, this general pattern of residential segregation does not entail as rigid a social division of space. For even though it could be argued that the elites and middle classes of Mexico City have generally aimed to separate themselves from the lower classes—in what I call an aspiration of unmixing—they have

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<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the most striking examples of this contiguity and contrast are the middle and upper class residential developments—from suburb-like neighborhoods to gated communities—that stand side-by-side with the most precarious of slums, especially in the southwestern periphery. The complexities of such proximity and distance, and the anxieties that it arouses among the elites have recently been explored in the film *La Zona*.

historically depended on the latter's proximity, especially for cheap domestic labor. Indeed, the aspiration of unmixing has historically been inseparable from the anxieties of actual mixing.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the elites began to abandon the socially mixed and densely populated spaces of the old city for new exclusive residential developments along Reforma, a wide and elegant boulevard built in the mid nineteenth century to connect the central city to the president's residence in Chapultepec Park (Piccato 2001). During this time the city underwent radical transformations, as modernization and the separation of social classes into distinct urban spaces became a priority of the Porfirian regime (Tenorio Trillo 1996).<sup>20</sup> A number of policies and regulations were implemented to eradicate the poor (and especially such delinquent figures as peddlers, drunkards, prostitutes and petty thieves) from the more elegant areas in the city's urban center, and to prevent their appearance in the new wealthy residential developments. But despite efforts to enforce separation, the boundaries between rich and poor areas in the city were rather porous and interlocking and the exclusion of the poor from the elegant quarters of the city was never fully completed (Lear 2001; Piccato 2001).

The city's explosive growth from the 1940s onwards intensified already existing patterns of spatial segregation. But a concomitant process must also be noted. Very little historiography of Mexico City after the 1940s is available. Yet, as the writings of chroniclers such as Jorge Ibargüengoitia (2002) and of novelists such as Jose Emilio

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<sup>20</sup> Porfirio Díaz was the modernizing dictator that governed Mexico from the late 19th century until he was overthrown by the revolutionary uprising.

Pacheco (1999) among others make clear, during this time there were a number of spaces of interclass sociability in the city. The historic center, for example, remained a multi-class area at least until the late 1970s. Public universities, too, were spaces where different social classes came together. The parks and plazas of the city, and even public transportation, were socially mixed. This period indeed marked an era of social mobility and of the expansion of the urban middle classes (Loaeza 1988), a dynamic that started to unravel in the 1980s. And yet this image of social mobility and interclass sociability, as faithful to history as it may have been, disavows another important dimension of urban life during the golden years of “stabilizing development,” namely, the failure of the post-revolutionary state to incorporate the bulk of the urban poor into its modernizing projects.<sup>21</sup>

Be that as it may, the point I want to make is that while unmixing has historically been an aspiration of Mexican elites and middle-classes, spatial separation has always been an unfinished and unstable process in Mexico City. It has always been disrupted by the presence of the urban poor, even if only during certain times of day, and haunted by racial anxieties. The close, even intimate spatial interactions between social classes take the form of patron-client relations. Take, for instance, relations between middle class employers and domestic workers. While there is little anthropological research on domestic work in Mexico City, my own observations on the topic resonate with Donna Goldstein’s (2003) highly nuanced and informative discussion of domestic work in Rio

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<sup>21</sup> This other dimension was described by Oscar Lewis in the 1960’s in his (in)famous ethnography *The Children of Sánchez* and by Luis Buñuel’s film *Los Olvidados*. See: Lewis, O. (1961). *The children of Sánchez : autobiography of a Mexican family*. New York,, Random House, Lomnitz, L. A. d. (1977). *Networks and marginality: life in a Mexican shantytown*. New York, Academic Press.

de Janeiro. Goldstein discusses the intimate relations between (often female) employers and domestic workers as “ambiguous affections,” that is, relations characterized by friendliness and proximity and yet by an unbreachable distance. “The site of employer and domestic worker relations is really a site of class formation and differentiation,” she argues, where class differences and inequalities come to be seen as “natural.”

But there is more to these interactions. Precisely because of their oscillation between proximity and distance they also allow the domestication of anxieties about the urban poor. Located in a hierarchical relation of dependency, the domestic worker becomes separated from the unknown and dangerous urban masses “out there.” A similar logic informs fleeting interactions in urban space. The figure of the *franelero*, literally the man with the cloth (which refers to a piece of red fabric used to indicate to drivers where to park their cars) is a paradigmatic example, to which I shall return in detail in Chapter 5. The *franelero* is usually a young male who charges “a tip” for keeping watch over cars that are parked on public (and presumably free) spots on the street. At the moment of transaction he is located within a relation of co-dependency between social classes. To be sure, the relations between domestic workers and their employers differ in numerous crucial ways from the fleeting transactions between car owners and people like the *franeleros* (not least because the latter mobilize a subtle threat of violence, along the lines of: “I’m not responsible for what might happen to your car if you don’t pay”). But they are informed by a similar patron-client form of sociability: social classes coming together in relations of hierarchical co-dependency, where each performs his or her place and which, precisely because of this, serve as sites of class formation and differentiation and for the naturalization of inequality.

Patron-client relations have been defined in social science literature as consisting of forms of reciprocal exchange between actors in an unequal power relation. (Fox 1994) In studies of political “clientelism”, “clients” appear as “actors who give their political support to a broker or a patron in exchange for particular goods, favors and services.” (Auyero 2000) Scholars of “clientelism” in post-revolutionary Mexico have argued that the state was the quintessential patron, distributing protection to a variety of clients, who in turn acted as patrons of their own clients (and so on, recursively, throughout social hierarchies) (Lomnitz 1982). The “patron-client” relation is often thought about as one between the poor and corrupt political leaders, such as, for example, the paradigmatic case of street vendors. But patron-client relations have also been central to individual everyday activities in an unequal society like Mexico. In this broader sense, a patron is, as Foster described it in his classical study of Tzintzuntzan, “someone who combines status, power, influence, authority” and who enters into a relation with “someone of a lesser position—a client, who under specific circumstances he is willing to help” (Foster 1963: 1282).

The relation between Bernardo and Giovanni is of a somewhat different nature: they are neighbors, with only a wall separating the latter’s *vecindad* from Bernardo’s renovated building. As such it cannot be located within the usual sites of encounter between social classes. In this context, Bernardo’s appeal to patron-client forms of sociability becomes especially unstable. Giovanni has offered to protect Bernardo from potentially hostile and unwelcoming people in the *barrio*, a protection that Bernardo welcomes, acknowledging that he is in “their” territory. Indeed, Bernardo’s description of Giovanni follows conventional stereotypes. He appears as a street-smart and rough



character, resentful and aggressive. In this respect the figure of Giovanni resonates with the *pelado* or the urban rabble, including the traces of the “Indian” within him and a temporality of backwardness. But their residential proximity and Bernardo’s own (neo) liberal sensibilities throw their seemingly natural differences into question, anchoring Bernardo within the violence of class and racialized difference in contemporary Mexico City. In this sense the interaction destabilizes Bernardo’s own aspirations to an imagined cosmopolitan modernity.

### **Beyond the Pale...**

As we have seen, oscillating between proximity and distance, Bernardo’s relation to Giovanni exposes a particular ambivalence: the wish to be accepted into the *barrio*, the fascination with its urban charisma (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009), appears together with a sense of threat and apprehension, which bears the spatiotemporal imaginaries of *mestizaje*. But as I discussed in the introduction, the rescue is not only about an aspiration to experience and come to terms with the *barrio* and its characters. It is also about intervening upon both the space and its inhabitants. On the one hand, the rescue is concerned with redeeming and modernizing the masses that inhabit the historic center (and removing their atavisms). On the other hand, the rescue entails a spatiotemporal overhaul of the space, which would bring it into line with a cosmopolitan present not by reforming the masses who inhabit it, but rather by simply removing them from it. This inherent tension of the rescue was especially visible in regards to the presence of informal street vendors throughout the historic center, which appeared as a particularly vexing

problem in the financial corridor.<sup>22</sup>

In this better conserved and more elegant quarter, where buildings restored for residential use ranged from seventeenth century mansions to art-deco architectural gems, the Foundation had targeted a more affluent market, mainly young professionals such as Armando, whom we met in the introduction, and well-to-do, recently married couples like Camille and her husband Daniel. While their social networks of these residents overlapped with those of artists and cultural promoters living in the cultural corridor, there were also significant differences between both groups. Residents in the financial corridor generally came from affluent families and many grew up in the most exclusive neighborhoods of the city. They tended to have more economic security than their counterparts in the cultural corridor, with professions and occupations ranging from investment bankers or graphic designers to architects, members of the film and advertising industry, government officials, journalists and art and cultural promoters.

The new residents of the financial corridor thus had a somewhat different experience of the historic center. To begin with, crime was not a central concern for people living there. Indeed, some viewed this area as safer than other parts of the city

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<sup>22</sup> These streets were once the wealthiest and most exclusive quarters of the city, where the elites dwelled in monumental palaces. And although it gradually lost its residential character it continued serving as the city's business and commercial center well into the twentieth century. While its economic centrality declined as the city further expanded in the last decades of the twentieth century, the financial corridor remained the site of important commercial and governmental activities, now increasingly mixed with tourism functions. Indeed, this area alone contains many of the Historic Center's heritage sites, as well as the majority of its hotels, restaurants, and museums Coulomb, R. (2000). "Gobernabilidad democrática y sostenibilidad financiera para el Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México." *L'Ordinaire Latino American* **181**: 65-80. Thus, although its gradual deterioration proceeded hand in hand with that of the rest of the historic center, it never reached the levels of dereliction and abandonment visible in other neighborhoods to the south and especially to the east and north of the Zócalo Monnet, J. (1995). *Usos e imágenes del centro histórico de la ciudad de México*. Mexico, D.F., Departamento del Distrito Federal, Centro de Estudio Mexicanos y Centroamericanos, Suárez Pareyó, A. (2004). "El Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México al Inicio del Siglo XXI." *Boletín del Instituto de la Vivienda de Chile* **19**(51): 75-95.

thanks to the heavy police presence and the sophisticated security apparatus that had been introduced as part of the rescue. Moreover, there were very few *vecindades* in this area, and hence almost no troublesome neighbors to be reckoned with. Indeed, the trope of standing out because one has arrived to a *barrio*—central to the narratives of artists living and working in Regina—was not as salient among new residents here. But much like the artists living in Regina and its surrounding streets, residents of this area were attracted to the historic center by a yearning to inhabit Mexico City as a vibrant, cosmopolitan urban space. And yet, just like in Regina, a sense of menace permeated the new residents' conversations and narratives about living there. Here, however, the menace was not embodied in the figure of the neighbor but in the figure of the street vendor. The latter appeared as a nebulous force, depicted with clearly racialized and racist undertones as a spreading disease or plague, and—most worryingly from their perspective—possibly a chronic condition.

Such concerns routinely took central stage during meetings of the Historic Center Residents Association, a tenants organization that brought together a number of new residents' who lived in this area.<sup>23</sup> Take, for example, a conversation that took place one Wednesday morning in April 2006, when the Residents Association was holding its

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<sup>23</sup> The Residents Association originally congregated at one of the restored buildings owned and operated by the, where a group of neighbors came together to discuss and act upon their dissatisfaction with the Foundation handled their concerns as tenants. But it quickly opened its doors to other new inhabitants of the Historic Center, including those living in the few renovated buildings that were not the property of the Foundation, as well as to prominent business owners in the area. When I started frequenting its meetings and activities in February 2006, just a few months after its official foundation in November 2005, the Association was composed of a few dedicated individuals who served as unofficial liaisons with both government officials and Slim's Foundation. The association's stated mission thus became broader: to ensure the proper implementation and maintenance of the Rescue, especially the removal of street vendors and the continuation of public security measures. But most importantly, the Association brought new residents together in a myriad of social events, from private parties to restaurant openings and art exhibitions, and thus helped foster a sense of community among them.

weekly meeting in a recently opened café. As usual, there were very few people at the gathering. Present as always was Armando, who lived in a spacious and sparsely furnished apartment a few blocks from the café. Gabriela, an academic in her mid thirties was also in attendance. After many years living in the United States, where she had pursued graduate studies in history, Gabriela had returned to Mexico in 2005 and settled with her husband, a member of Mexico's diplomatic corps, in an apartment they had recently bought in the vicinity. A politically committed and resourceful person, Gabriela was active in a non-governmental organizations working to foster transparency in public life and she was also an enthusiastic member of the Residents' Association. She, for example, was responsible for organizing public meetings between residents of the historic center and the candidates running for mayor in 2006, in which they were invited to discuss their plans specifically for this area. Finally, beside myself, there was a new face at the meeting: Juan, a forty two year old Argentinean who worked as an independent publicist. Both his apartment and his studio, which he used primarily for photo shootings, were located in a stunning art-deco building on a busy pedestrian street nearby.

The tone of the conversation that morning expressed the usual sense of urgency that discussions of the street vendors problem exuded. Juan complained about the recurrent and abrupt changes of voltage that happened on a regular basis in his street and which negatively impacted his work. He blamed street vendors for such occurrences, claiming that they illegally connected to the street's electricity grid, creating disruptions in the system. Armando seconded this complaint and added that, because street vendors often occupied entire sidewalks, walking became an almost impossible and always unpleasant activity. Gabriela interjected by saying in a sarcastic tone that the only solution to the

problem of street vendors was “to build an underground tunnel below the historic center and to concentrate them all down there.” “Or at least to put them in the subway,” replied Juan, further adding that the biggest obstacle to their removal was the vendors collusion with the police. Just a few days earlier, he reported, outside his building, he heard one vendor warning another not to set his stand, as the police were about to make their daily round.

Street vendors were indeed a recurring theme not only in meetings of the Residents Association but, more generally, in quotidian conversations among new residents of the historic center with whom I conducted my fieldwork. The most common expression that I heard in reference to street vendors was that they were “a plague that keeps reproducing itself” (which cast the phenomenon as a sort of natural disaster). But there were many others: “filthy,” “noisy,” “rats” (that is criminals), “thieves,” “corrupt,” “illegal,” “a nuisance,” “an unpleasant sight,” “a bomb on the brink of explosion.” Interwoven with such negative images, new residents referred to street vendors as the embodiment of the forms of illegality, corruption and clientelist political practices that have hindered the consolidation of democracy in Mexico, a topic that I will develop in detail in Chapter 4.

While most vendors had already been removed from this area, a number of them used to concentrate around the subway station at the intersection of Tacuba Street and a pedestrian walkway with several renovated buildings, as well as in a handful of other scattered intersections. The police intermittently removed them from the area. Their presence there was thus neither constant, nor permanent, nor, for that matter, excessively numerous. It ranged from several of them on some days to few isolated ones or even none at all on other days. But the traces of the street vendors, which triggered anxieties about

the racialized masses, gestured to the always latent possibility of their return *en masse* and suggested that the promise of rescue could turn out to be void. Roberto, the cultural promoter and small entrepreneur who owned a cultural venue in the financial corridor and whom we met in the introduction, voiced the space-time relations of race and class in the historic center quite clearly by formulating his concern about street vendors in terms of “barbarian invasions” waiting to erupt at any moment.

And yet, as I hinted above, the rescue also entailed a certain incitement to reform the urban rabble, a modernizing imperative to educate the barbarian masses into modern standards of citizenship rather than to banish them from the center altogether. In the next chapter, I will examine in detail how new constructions of citizenship and democracy in neoliberal Mexico express themselves within the rescue project. To conclude the present chapter, however, I would like to show how the racial imaginaries that I have discussed, and specifically the construction and experience of class differences in terms of racialized incommensurability, saturate such idioms of citizenship.

Alfonso, a civil servant in his late twenties, and Marisol, a twenty four year-old student of art, were a recently married couple living in one of the renovated buildings on Regina Street. They arrived shortly after the violent incident that I discussed in Chapter 2 (the break-in during Eduardo’s party) and quickly befriended other residents in the building, like Omar, the performance artist working in the cultural center whom I also mentioned in the previous chapter. Alfonso grew up in a working class neighborhood in the southern periphery of the city and pulled himself up the social ladder. Although very involved in the social life of his building, he stood apart from the rest of his neighbors (and indeed from his wife). As a public servant, he had a rigorous schedule (often

working long hours) and wore a suit and a tie on a daily basis. He spoke in a formal manner (although he cursed often) and his training as a political scientist often became evident during conversations, as he would refer to particular laws, even to specific segments of those laws, when discussing, for example, the legal status of some of the street's building or Slim's participation in the rescue.

Perhaps because of his provenance and his own being out of place in his building, Alfonso was especially insistent that he and Marisol kept their interactions with old residents of the street and its surroundings to bare minimum. They would for sure make incursions to the small store down the street or to the tortilla shop in the *callejón*, but Alfonso was adamant about the importance of keeping distance. Indeed this was a topic that he mentioned constantly. During an interview Alfonso elaborated:

My cousin tends to arrive [to visit] a bit drunk, and he greets the people over there, "What's up my friend?"—the guys across the street, and he talks to them and everything. And I told him very clearly: "I do not want you to talk to those guys. If you want to talk to them, talk to them and leave. Don't enter my place. And under no circumstance do I want you to invite them in fucker. Never, ever." "Hey, but if they're the guys" (*la banda*, as in a gang of friends). "They are not the guys, those assholes are people that live on the same street and have their own logic, and I don't want to engage them, because they would eventually end up entering the building, and that's not good for us, because the building is not made for that, it doesn't have strong doors. I mean no! (Interview with author, November 18, 2006)

For Alfonso, there was no possibility of identification with old residents. Unlike Bernardo and others, he instead insisted that they must be kept at a distance at all times. And yet, while he wanted no personal intimacy with them, Alfonso partook of the pedagogical discourse of rescue. Consider, for example, a couple of interactions with the owner from the small store down the street:

- Alfonso:** My first contact, my first friction, with the people of the *barrio* was with the woman at the (small grocery) store. I went to buy some beers, and I knew how much beers cost, and the lady increased the prices of everything by two or three pesos. So she says, “it is this much.” And I say, “why so much?” And she says, “because that’s how much beer costs here, always.” And I say, “so you have your own prices then?” “Yes.” And I say, “and you have never been visited by the *procuraduría*? A recommendation about it should be in order.” (...) And actually yesterday something very interesting happened—you gradually start to get the dynamics of the *barrio*. We were arriving home from the movies at around 10 at night, and Marisol tells me...
- Marisol:** I say—a guy was standing by his car, looking at it—and I say, “ouch, someone broke that guy’s car window, we must file a police complaint or something... (...)
- Alfonso:** There was a lot of broken glass on the street. And I say, “that’s terrible” and we start to walk and then I thought—because the car was in front of the store, and besides they [the owner and her family] are always sitting right outside the store. (...) And then I said out loud, “these things should not happen in this street and the way to prevent them is by working together...”
- Marisol:** Filing complaints!
- Alfonso:** So then I turn to the store and I say to the woman, “did you see that this guy’s window was broken?” [And she replied:] “No, no, I didn’t notice. God only knows when it happened!” (...) And I said, “well it is terrible that these things happen and we don’t notice,” as if saying, “give me a break, if you see that someone breaks a car’s window, do something!”
- Alejandra:** You think they did see?
- Alfonso:** No, I don’t know and I don’t care. That’s not the point. The point is that, in a polite but consistent way, we must get these people to engage (Interview with the author, November 18, 2006).

In the fragment that I have just quoted Alfonso positioned himself on the civilizing end of the longstanding temporal, spatial, and racial relations that I have mapped out in this chapter. In other words, he conceived of himself as standing on the side of modern values, as well as of the law, in contrast to the storeowner’s “traditional” and negative



behaviors, such as arbitrarily incrementing the prices of products. But he also activated (neo) liberal idioms of citizenship, according to which one ought to take responsibility for one's own actions and actively participate in public life. Like Leon Krauze with the intolerant teenager of his newspaper editorial, Alfonso took it upon himself to educate the storeowner, that is, to encourage her to partake in civic values, such as reporting transgression or illegal behavior. But from his perspective she ultimately appeared as beyond the pale of such redemption and indeed, as I will argue in Chapter 4, as beyond the pale of citizenship.

## **Chapter 4: Clients of Slim**

### **Introduction**

It was a cool February evening and the views of the National Palace and the Cathedral from a roof-terrace bar that overlooked the Zócalo were magnificent. Furnished with lounge-style couches and minimalist lamps that cast a dim light, this was a favorite meeting place for new residents, executives of nearby banks and young civil servants working for the local government. On this occasion, the Residents' Association was holding a town hall meeting. Government and police officials were expected to talk about the rescue and address quality of life concerns, particularly the problem of parking in the financial corridor, which was a foremost concern among new residents. Since this was the Association's first high profile meeting, Armando and Gabriela, its most committed members, had worked hard to secure a large turnout. In addition to their own communication channels (primarily email lists and word of mouth) they had used the Foundation's networks to reach out to artists and cultural entrepreneurs living or working in the cultural corridor. Therefore, in contrast to the handful of inhabitants of the financial corridor who usually frequented their meetings, this occasion brought together a far wider assortment of people—residents, gallery owners, artists, cultural promoters, restaurateurs and investors—all loosely connected to each other through their involvement with the rescue and more specifically with Slim's Historic Center Foundation.

With a live band playing jazz as the guests arrived, the event exuded a cool and relaxed atmosphere. By and large young and stylish, the guests mingled in groups or

moved across the terrace, introducing themselves to new faces or engaging in small talk with previous acquaintances, glasses of wine in their hands. Armando, who could not hide his satisfaction with the large turnout, enthusiastically greeted people as they arrived, while Gabriela made sure that the panel was ready, name-holders and microphones in place. Donning a suit for the occasion Bernardo chatted with Andres, a young executive of the Foundation, and with various members of its board of directors, a group of affluent, middle-aged women locally known as “the aunts of Slim.” Pedro, dressed in corduroy pants and jacket, a distinctly formal outfit for his standards, sat in a table nearby with Monica, also formally attired in a purple suede dress and black leather boots. They were accompanied by Mario, a very young chef who had recently opened a restaurant and concert venue in the cultural corridor and who was struggling to keep his business afloat on a low budget.

Present was also Luis, an engineer in his late twenties responsible for the award-winning renovation of a building owned by his family (one of few new residential complexes in the financial corridor that were not property of Slim), together with some of his tenants, many of whom he counted as friends as well. Juan, a publicist who had recently moved to the historic center, conversed with Carla, a visual artist, and Mariana, a graphic designer, both of them regulars at new residents’ events. Camille and her husband Daniel, who would soon open a restaurant nearby, stood in a corner with other, already well-established restaurateurs.

When approximately sixty people had arrived Armando invited all to take their places so that the presentations could begin. Using the formal demeanor appropriate for such occasions, he introduced the state officials who would be speaking at the meeting—

the director of the Fideicomiso, the local governments office in charge of the rescue, and the spokesperson for the historic center's security program—and thanked them for listening to the concerns of new residents. A slim, good-looking woman of delicate manners and affable smile, the Fideicomiso's director was an experienced politician who had occupied various high profile positions in the local administration before mayor AMLO put her in charge of the rescue in 2002. She was highly esteemed by new residents and investors alike. But while most described her as well-intentioned and efficient, they considered her incapable—citing corruption and lack of support in the local government—of adequately handling the center's most pressing problems, especially the increasing return of street vendors to the renovated area of the financial corridor.

The director presented an overview of the rescue, insisting that this was an economic and not a cultural endeavor, “a crucial project for the future and the economic viability of the city.” Many jobs had been created since the renovation works began, she reported, and the numbers of visitors and tourists had dramatically increased. Several formerly “invaded” (*invadidos*) spaces had been recently “recovered” (*recuperados*) while others, like the sidewalks around the Zocalo, remained a challenge. But a question remained, she continued. How to make life more enjoyable in the historic center, with all the noise, pollution, traffic and lack of parking? “We must understand that [this] is not a private residential neighborhood. There are two million people passing through [this area] everyday.” She assured her audience that the Fideicomiso was currently working on a project to modernize public parking lots through fiscal incentives, but this would probably not be finished by the end of her tenure.

The police's spokesperson, a lawyer in his late twenties named Tomás, who had worked in a private law firm before joining the local administration a few years back, declared that his job was "to establish links with citizens", and as if to prove his point he referred to multiple meetings he had recently held with new residents to discuss the problem of parking. An official request (*oficio*) for special parking documents had already been submitted to the higher authorities, he reported, and the police were waiting for an answer. Additionally, police officers had been instructed to allow new residents vehicular access to the historic center during protests and blockades by presenting proof of address. "Some of you have mentioned," he continued, "that [police] officers don't do their jobs." And he encouraged the audience to report such cases, or any other problem, by calling the police's command center, for which he provided their "direct" (i.e. non public) number. But he also encouraged new residents to respect parking hours in the financial corridor: "we have traffic regulations that we must respect."

Daytime parking was indeed strictly prohibited in all renovated streets. The police would place a wheel clamp on any car within minutes after it parked there, and would charge a four-hundred-peso fine for releasing it.<sup>1</sup> But while parking was officially allowed in the area after six in the evening, new residents complained that their cars were sometimes nevertheless fined, or even towed. They demanded more transparent regulations and clearer parking signals. But they also asked for special permits to park outside their buildings at night.

After the presentations Armando reminded all those who wanted parking

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<sup>1</sup> Although traffic in the historic center improved drastically after the introduction of this regulation in June 2003, it remained highly unpopular among the public. Most registered complaints about the police in the Center stemmed from perceived abuses regarding the immobilization program.

documents to write down their information on slips of paper placed at a table near the entrance. He also encouraged the audience to help themselves to a copy of the Civic Culture Act brochure, which summarized a recently passed local legislation dealing with “quality of life” infractions (See Chapter 5). “We suffer from noise and other annoyances that are prohibited by [this law],” declared Armando. “The rescued zone ought to be clear of street vendors, so we must denounce them when we see them. (...) The homeless can also be removed.”

The contours of a community of new residents were delineated at this meeting: not only as composed of a generally young, educated and culturally sophisticated group of people, but also as engaged with the city’s public life and committed to the recovery of the historic center. And yet that which granted a semblance of coherence to this community, which enabled its coming together and which guaranteed its sustainability was present in the meeting only in absence, though no less forcefully for that: Carlos Slim. To begin with, Slim had created the conditions for the convergence of this rather diverse group of people in the historic center— appropriate conditions for investment, residential spaces, support for the arts. He was thus, too, what continued to connect most of the meeting attendees, as many were tenants of his properties, artists working for his cultural projects, or executives of his Foundation. But most importantly, I would argue, he rendered their otherwise sometimes extraordinary expectations and demands imaginable, such as obtaining special parking permits in this chaotic and heavily transited area.

Slim’s immense political capital and summoning power and prestige distinguished the rescue initiative from the start. Despite (or perhaps precisely because of) his vast

economic interest in the historic center, he stood as the quintessential embodiment of the moral authority of civil society working to recover the symbolic heart of the nation from crime, disorder and illegality. In fact, precisely because Slim was a spectacularly successful businessman (at the time of my fieldwork the third richest in the world according to Forbes magazine, by now the first) and, simultaneously, the representative of civil society's moral authority, he was perceived by the new residents of the historic center with whom I conducted my fieldwork as a powerful guarantor of the promise of rescue, that is, of the transformation of the historic center into a cosmopolitan urban space.

The new residents related to the figure of Slim in his double appearance as businessman (and a generous patron of the arts) and as the embodiment of civil society. This complicated relation expressed itself forcefully in the activities of the Residents Association. As I described in the previous chapter, the association emerged as a group of Slim's tenants coming together to demand good services in exchange for their rents, but it quickly opened its doors to other new inhabitants of the historic center and to certain business owners in the area. It thus formulated its mission in terms of organized civil society working to ensure the success of the rescue, and especially the removal of street vendors and the continuation of public security measures. What became evident with the association was therefore how the figure of Slim, which enabled and authorized it, oscillated from landlord to the moral leader of civil society. And with this oscillation the image of his clients, too, shifted.

The meeting I described above thus captured the porous and always shifting boundaries between, on the one hand, a project to rescue the historic center as a national

public space, indeed as the symbolic heart of the nation, and on the other hand a private business enterprise. It showed how new residents navigated this porosity. In other words, the meeting revealed how the nature of the rescue project implies a fundamental illegibility, for the historic center's new residents, between their roles as committed citizens partaking of a national public project and as clients of Carlos Slim.

The redrawing of the public-private distinction under late capitalism has received ample attention in recent scholarly literature (Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Hibou 2004), together with the redistribution of risks and responsibilities from the state to society that it appears to entail (Rose, Barry et al. 1996). Most work has concentrated on mapping this reconfiguration, on understanding how the state governs from a distance, or how it makes itself present in unexpected sites, such as for example non-governmental organizations (Trouillot 2001). According to this literature, what is of the state and what is not has become particularly unstable in this historical context. In contrast to this approaches, which seem to take the public/private distinction for granted, others have argued that the line dividing state and society, public and private, is constitutively porous and unstable, indeed that it is in itself an effect of state power (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1991).

The question then becomes how the state effect is produced at different moments, and with what political implications. Along these lines, Das and Poole (2004) have argued that the illegibility of its rules, procedures and practices is a central feature of the modern state and of the ways in which it penetrates into and is experienced by local communities (See also: Aretxaga 2003).<sup>2</sup> Drawing on these insights, I aim to understand

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<sup>2</sup> Das's has argued that tied to the state's technologies of writing and to the idea of the signature, the state's illegibility enables it oscillate between a "rational" mode—a set of rules and regulations—and a "magical" mode—an all-pervasive spectral presence associated with forces of danger. Das argues that the



how new residents navigate the elusive distinction between the state and the private as represented by the figure of Carlos Slim. I argue that the private/public (in) distinction that the rescue entails and inscribes upon the historic center results in a series of illegibilities, for example, of the role and location of the police. This, in turn, entails another crucial illegibility, namely, that of the distinction between the “citizen” and the “client.” In other words, while claiming the position of “citizens” (invested in a civic culture that has surmounted an authoritarian and antidemocratic politics) new residents continuously slide into the position of “clients” (people who enjoy special group privileges and protections via the mediation of Slim), until the distinction between these two forms of political belonging collapses. This distinction, then, is at once crucial for and untenable within their cosmopolitan class position of new residents.

I first explore the historical and political context—the conditions of possibility—for Slim to stand as an emblem of civil society. I analyze how in this context the figure of the street vendor has been construed as the ultimate embodiment of outmoded forms of inhabiting public space and thus as the antithesis of civil society. I then move on to explore the ambiguous location of Slim within the historic center’s policing project. Finally, I analyze how the figure of Slim mediates interactions between new residents, street vendors and the police. In such interactions, I show, the boundary between citizen and client collapses.

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contradictory aspects of the legibility and iterability of the written sign suggest that forms of governance instituted by the state through technologies of writing also open up “the possibility of forgery, imitation and the mimetic performance of its powers”. Das, V. (2004). *The Signature of the State. The Paradox of Illegibility. Anthropology in the Margins of the State*. V. Das and D. Poole. Santa Fe, School of American Research Press: 225-252.

## **The Rise of King Midas**

“He is a King Midas, who turns everything he touches into something beautiful,” said the clerk of a print shop on Regina Street in reference to Slim and his participation in the rescue. This was not the only time that I heard people describe Slim as King Midas during my fieldwork, although most often the reference was to gold, rather than to beauty. For Slim’s spectacular rise to one of the world’s wealthiest people is common knowledge in Mexico. Some regard this rise with admiration, the deserved good fortune of a hard working, brilliant man who creates thousands of jobs for Mexicans; others view him with pride, as if his astonishing wealth was a collective accomplishment; many criticize him as a ruthless monopolist.

Be that as it may, Slim’s economic climb and his position as an ambiguous symbol of civil society is intimately bound with Mexico’s recent history. He first attained national and international prominence after buying the state-owned telephone company Teléfonos de México (later renamed TELMEX) in 1990. Already a successful businessman by the time of this acquisition, he had an especially close relationship to President Carlos Salinas (1988-1994), responsible for consolidating the neoliberal restructuring of Mexico’s economy, which included the privatization of state-owned enterprises that his predecessor Miguel De la Madrid had started.<sup>3</sup> Along with other businessmen and women, Slim was a prominent protagonist of the transformation of the post-revolutionary state’s relation to national business elites.

Despite the populist stance of the regime, and although business elites were never

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<sup>3</sup> As Minister of Planning and Budget Salinas was in fact the main architect of economic reforms during De la Madrid’s administration.

part of the PRI's three corporate sectors (worker, peasant and popular), they maintained an intimate and highly advantageous relation with the state throughout the twentieth century. Although some of the regime's policies went against the interests of these elites, (for example land reform) the overall economic direction of the post-revolutionary state, and especially after the 1940s when industrialization became the primary goal, was favorable to private capital, national and international.<sup>4</sup> But, rhetorically describing itself as the representative of the popular masses, the state generally disavowed—at least in public—its cozy and corrupt relations with business elites (Knight 1996). Official state rhetoric often decried these elites as antinational, and at some specific moments, there were important ruptures between business interests and the state.<sup>5</sup> This public relation, however, had changed by the mid to late 1980s. At that time, Slim and other business people openly supported the candidacy of Carlos Salinas. The Salinas millionaires, as they came to be known, benefited from this support via the privatization of state enterprises. Slim, at the time dubbed “the favorite businessman of (Salinas) presidency,” came to be identified in popular imagination as the main beneficiary of Salinas's reforms (Rodríguez Reyna 1992).

As is well known, Mexico's turn to neoliberal policies followed the massive financial crisis that engulfed the country in the early 1980s, which further delegitimized

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<sup>4</sup> This is an overtly abridged description of more than seven decades, in which, to be sure, relations between the private sector and the state were constantly changing. For a detailed history of these relations see: Camp, R. (1989). *Entrepreneurs and Politics in Twentieth Century Mexico*. New York, Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> One critical rupture between the post-revolutionary state and business elites happened in 1982, as President López Portillo responded to the growing economic crisis by condemning the massive capital flight as anti-Mexican and nationalizing the banks, a desperate attempt to re-anchor the legitimacy of the ruling party in the narrative of the Revolution. See: Lomnitz, C. (2008). "Narrating the Neoliberal Moment: History, Journalism, Historicity." *Public Culture* 20(1): 39-56.

an already challenged post-revolutionary state. As elsewhere, here too the usual panoply of Washington-inspired structural adjustment policies was implemented during the 1980s and the 1990s. These ranged from trade liberalization (most notably the North American Free Trade Agreement) to the privatization of state-owned companies and the opening to private capital of areas previously reserved for state investment; or from the reduction of public spending in health and education to the restructuring of poverty alleviation programs (Weiss 1996). As elsewhere, too, precisely the authoritarian character of the regime, which enjoyed both excessive presidential power and lack of congressional opposition (the PRI only lost its congressional majority in 1997), allowed for the relatively rapid and successful introduction of the reforms. While they were controversial and mired in accusations of corruption, they also generated significant expectations, especially among the middle classes, who had seen their incomes and their quality of life dramatically plummet in the aftermath of the 1982 crisis (Lomnitz 2003). Indeed, against such a bleak background, president Salinas' promises to bring about economic and political modernization and to lead Mexico into the "first world" were enthusiastically received.

In the case of Telmex, Salinas fast-tracked privatization, ensuring that the process would be completed during his presidency, in order to capitalize on the political gains of his "modernization" program. This resulted in, among other things, deferring regulation. As opposed to what the World Bank and foreign investors advocated, namely, a regionally segmented company that would entail more competition, the privatization favored a nationally integrated company. This option was not only favored by Slim, but also by the telephone workers' union, whose support was crucial in order to get the

privatization off the ground (Mariscal 2004: 90).<sup>6</sup> In the end, the privatization conferred enormous political power on Slim. For instance, Telmex was the only company trading stocks internationally, so moves in its stock had a significant impact on the financial stability of the country (Ibid.: 92-93). Moreover, as part of the privatization package, the company was guaranteed a monopoly for several years before the market would open up to competitors.

But regulation has only been partially implemented and competition remains scant. Critics have accused Slim of keeping competitors at bay through questionable practices. As an editorialist for the *New York Times* put it, Slim's monopoly has come to be seen as "the natural order of things" (Porrtter 2007). Between the privatization of Telmex in the early 1990s and his coronation by Forbes as the world's richest person in March 2010 Slim's fortune skyrocketed from one to 53 billion dollars.<sup>7</sup> As Slim's staggering rise has gained him national and international fame, he has increased his philanthropic endeavors and public profile; at the same time he has been openly denounced for his monopolistic practices. And yet, as I already mentioned, he remains an ambivalent figure in Mexico, revered as a national entrepreneur, a Midas king who turns everything into gold, and reviled as an obstacle to the country's true liberalization.

The history of Mexico's neoliberalization is, of course, part of a global re-

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<sup>6</sup> The union demanded maintaining its structure and guarantees of no-layoffs, which would have been difficult in a disaggregated and segmented company. These demands were granted in a 1989 agreement between President Salinas and the telephone workers union leader, in exchange for their support of the privatization. Moreover, workers were given shares of the company. Mariscal, J. (2004). "Telecommunications Reform in Mexico from a Comparative Perspective." *Latin American Politics and Society* 46(4): 83-114.

<sup>7</sup> 2.1 billion dollars in 1992, 3.7 billion dollars in 1993, and 6.6 en 1994. Salas Porras, A. (2000). "Hacia un nuevo mecenazgo político? Democracia y participación electoral de los grandes empresarios en México." *Estudios Sociológicos* 18(1): 53-84.

orientation of the economy that has seen the gradual dismantlement of the welfare state (either as a reality or as an aspiration) and the concomitant reconfiguration of state-society relations (Rose, Barry et al. 1996). In Mexico, the history of neoliberalization has been tied to the demise of the twentieth century revolution and to the regime that stemmed from it. For decades, the legitimacy of this regime rested on the rhetoric of the revolution as a still unfinished project. The promises of the revolution were yet to be delivered, perennially postponed in the interest of economic growth and social stability, which the state prided itself to have accomplished while continuing to represent the interests of the popular masses (Joseph and Nugent 1994; Meyer 1995; Knight 1996). The strength of the state crucially rested on its inclusionary appearance, that is, on its capacity to appear as a social arbiter, or as the regulator of social relations in a context of inequality, class fractures and the specter of revolutionary violence. Thus, while the authoritarian character of the post-revolutionary regime facilitated the implementation of neoliberal reforms, this very same process in turn hastened the loss of its legitimacy (Lomnitz 2008).

Carlos Slim's fortune and prominence have emerged out of this transition. A direct beneficiary of his close links to the PRI regime and of the latter's less than transparent privatizations and a monopolist who fiercely combats competition on his own turf, he has also become the symbol of an entrepreneurial, hard-working and forward looking Mexico. Moreover, for many he stands as a moral figure who can represent the interests of the nation, a point that I will elaborate in more detail in the next section. Slim's power and influence on Mexico's public life is perhaps well captured in the following statement. As the 2006 election neared I asked an executive of the Foundation how the election

outcome might impact the rescue and Slim's interests in the area. He gave me a patronizing smile, as if he could not believe my naïveté, and replied: "Whoever wins has to sit and discuss with [Slim]. Not the other way around."

### **Civil Society to the Rescue**

The rescue of the historic center was by no means Carlos Slim's only appearance as the moral authority of civil society. Simultaneously with his involvement in the rescue, in the Fall of 2005 Slim was the originator and the main promoter of a much higher profile project: the "National Agreement for Unity, Rule of Law, Development, Stability, and Employment," also known as the Chapultepec Agreement. This was a twelve-page document that, claiming to be the initiative of a diverse group of citizens and to express the views of civil society, contained a series of proposals for putting the country on the right course towards the future: consolidating democracy, strengthening the rule of law, and accelerating economic growth through private investment. All Mexicans were invited to sign the Agreement, which began as follows:

The signatories of this document propose a National Agreement to all Mexican society. As members of society we assume our co-responsible role in the advancement of the country, respectful of the State's constitutional responsibility to coordinate and channel the efforts of all Mexicans towards Mexico's development.

The Agreement was presented to the public in a solemn yet glamorous ceremony at the Chapultepec Palace, the magnificent nineteenth century presidential residence turned museum, on September 29, 2005. More than three hundred famous celebrities and public intellectuals attended the carefully staged and highly publicized event and ceremoniously added their signatures to the document: a mixture of prominent businessmen and women,

intellectuals, journalists, distinguished scientists, pop singers, soap opera actors, and football players, among others. After the public signing ceremony Slim and other organizers, which included the president of the most powerful business association in the country, a Nobel prize winning scientist and a famous pop singer, offered a press conference to further elaborate on the context and the content of the document. Slim presented the Agreement as: “an initiative of civil society that originates in the productive sector, workers and businesspeople” but that also included the perspectives of other “sectors” of society. Indeed, Slim and his fellow speakers constantly reiterated that this was a consensual and inclusive initiative, which reflected months of intense debate. But if the contours of civil society remained vague in their declarations, as indeed he referred to “sectors,” a language reminiscent of the corporatism of the old regime, its force seemed all too clear. As an initiative of civil society, the Agreement was taken to represent the general sentiments of the nation, and, as such, to stand beyond criticism. In the words of pop singer Emmanuel:

I think that the [points in the Agreement] are good for all Mexicans. I don't think that there is a sector or a Mexican that says that these points, well, they do not strengthen my way of life, and they don't strengthen my country and my sector. I think these points help us all.

In this declaration, too, it was unclear whether civil society was composed of “Mexicans” or “sectors,” but its force was nonetheless reiterated. As members of civil society the Agreement's promoters presented themselves, and the document they produced, as bestowed with seemingly unquestionable moral authority and as representing principles that every Mexican would obviously want to promote, which suggested that critics of the agreement did not really belong in the nation. Their moral



authority, moreover, appeared in sharp contrast to a tainted, corrupt and power-hungry political class and an incompetent state. In other words, without renouncing to the language of “sectors” or organized groups, the Chapultepec Agreement construed civil society and the citizens that it congregated as ethical beings, morally superior to corrupt politicians, and co-responsible for the country’s development and future.

In the background of the Agreement stood the very real possibility that AMLO, by then the candidate of a center-left coalition, would win the presidential election in July 2006, with the campaign slogan “for the good of all, the poor first.” But as he traveled the country to promote the Agreement and to recruit adherents in what some commentators dubbed parallel campaign or the rise of a new Silvio Berlusconi, Slim continued to insist that the initiative was by no means a strategy to “pressure” or “tie the hands” of the future president, whomever he or she might be. It was, quite on the contrary, an initiative that detailed basic principles and ideals all Mexicans could agree upon: employment, stability, security, democracy.

The agreement enjoyed a mixed reception in the press. While political commentators were generally enthusiastic about it as an initiative of civil society, some expressed concern about Slim’s high profile involvement. Some pointed to his monopolistic practices, arguing that the word “competition” was conspicuously absent from the document. But while it was amply clear that Slim was exerting his enormous power on the political field to ensure his interests would be protected regardless of the presidential election’s outcome, it was striking how he could at once speak with the

authority of a concerned citizen and someone with the capacity of guiding the nation.<sup>8</sup>

Something akin to what Žižek has called cynicism as a form of ideology was at work here: “one knows the falsehood very well,” writes Žižek, “one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it” (Žižek 1989: 29). For all its claims to a post-ideological era, Žižek explains, cynical reason continues to operate as an ideological fantasy, that is, people know how things are yet they still continue to act as if they did not know. What was interesting in the Chapultepec Agreement, then, was not that it represented the interests of particular stakeholders—that much was evident to most observers and commentators—but rather its extraordinary ability to stand as an ideological fantasy and the willingness of so many to adopt a cynical distance and act as if civil society stood for the real thing.

In part this is because, at this historical juncture, Slim’s interests could indeed be conceived as national interests. As Jean and John Comaroff have argued,

The call for civil society typically presents itself as an emancipatory reaction to a familiar doubling: on one hand, to the greater opacity, intrusiveness and monopolistic tendencies of government; on the other hand, to its diminishing capacity to satisfy even minimally the political and economic aspirations of its component publics, to guarantee the commonwealth, or to meet the needs of its citizenry (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 43).

The roots of the fetishization of civil society, the Comaroffs continue, lie in the displacement of political sovereignty by the sovereignty of “the market”, “as if the latter had a mind and morality of its own”(Ibid). And no one in today’s Mexico could appear at once as the embodiment of the sovereign market and as the voice of civil society better than Slim.

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Slim seems to be perceived differently by many different people: a rightist Catholic by some, a Mexican Soros by others.

And yet, Slim's rise as the icon of civil society marks its transformation. In Mexico City especially, civil society came to the foreground in the aftermath of the devastating 1985 earthquake. It emerged as a term to designate the vibrancy and growing force of a civilian population capable of organizing relief efforts despite the incompetency and corruption of the state. As Fernando Escalante has argued, such local meaning resonated with the usages of the term in the context of the post-cold war democratic transitions in the former Eastern bloc, that is, as a "master term" that designated "political subjects who, from the outside of the political system (as understood to be the government, the party, and the bureaucracy), would finally undermine the Soviet system" (Escalante Gonzalbo 2006: 267). Yet Escalante points out that "civil society" emerged as a substitute not only for the political system, but also for *el pueblo*. This is so because, as I have discussed in the Introduction, in the context of post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism, the concept of *el pueblo* could not be mobilized without reference to the state, and it always entailed strong class and racial undertones. As it is used in the historic center and in contemporary public discourses about Mexico's transition to democracy, "civil society" not only presents itself as clearly distinct from a corrupt and inefficient state, but also as a counter-concept to *el pueblo*, now seen by the elites as representing the atavisms of the post-revolutionary state, and emblematically epitomized in the historic center by the figure of the street vendor.

In the Introduction I charted the emergence of (neo) liberal discourses of citizenship in Mexico, which are produced and circulated in a multiplicity of disparate sites and registers: from government programs that demand individual conducts in exchange for assistance to the work of non-governmental organizations that aim to eliminate

corruption or to encourage civic participation, or to the works of intellectuals, academics, experts, political commentators and pundits whose cacophonous voices saturate the printed and electronic media on a daily basis. One aspect of these discourses that interest me in particular, as it is central to the political and social sensibilities of new residents as well as to their temporal imaginations, is that they posit an almost evolutionary distinction between the “citizen”, an impossibly ideal type, and the “client,” associated with the corporate structures of the past.<sup>9</sup> The latter appears as an illegitimate, but also very importantly atavistic and residual form of political belonging (not a form of exercising citizenship rights). What I want to emphasize is that this image of the “citizen,” impossible as it may be, is not just the imaginary construct of intellectuals but a meaningful form that permeates social relations and interactions in the historic center.<sup>10</sup>

Consider, for example, the following excerpt from an interview with Andrés, a young high executive of the Foundation, a man in his mid thirties who lived in one of Slim’s renovated buildings for several years, before moving back to his childhood neighborhood, an affluent residential area near Chapultepec Park. Andrés, who was part of the social circles of new residents of the financial corridor (many of whom were his friends or acquaintances since childhood), was a very successful young executive who had quickly ascended to an important position within Slim’s emporium:

The [leaders of street vendors] are there because they handle ten, fifty thousand, a

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<sup>9</sup> This also reduces, or overlooks, other forms of popular politics, as for example represented by the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, where the demands are articulated in the form of autonomy from the state.

<sup>10</sup> Cahn, for example, studied the sensibilities and practices of small entrepreneurs, multilevel marketers, in the state of Michoacán to argue, precisely, that the tenets of “neoliberalism” have been embraced by a wide variety of people. Cahn, P. (2008). "Consuming Class: Multilevel Marketeers in Neoliberal Mexico." *Cultural Anthropology* 23(3): 429-452.

hundred thousand people, for a vote, for a march, for whatever you want. ... But they don't have a vision for the city or for the country. They are seeing where to position themselves, how to position themselves, how to stay in power. And they also receive a lot of money. I mean, each vendor pays between a hundred and four hundred pesos per day to their leader ... So, those who think (I don't want to be *malinchista*<sup>11</sup> or anything like that), but those who see the potential, the jobs that could be generated, all that we could offer [by a successful rescue project], are outside this little world. [He points to a piece of paper where he has drawn a map of the historic center where street vendors concentrate]. So, [my own] vision of Mexico fights with this little world, but this little world is very strong (Interview with author, August 22, 2006).

As part of his duties at the Foundation Andrés had worked very hard to bring other private investors to the historic center (for months he had unsuccessfully tried to convince supermarket and fitness chains to invest there) and had grown increasingly disillusioned about the prospects for future investments in the area. It was clear to Andrés that the local administration was not keeping its promises to expand the rescue or to maintain the renovated areas free of street vendors. To be sure, the post-election protests of 2006 only increased his sense of despair with regards to the center's problems. But Andrés' disillusionment reflected his social and political sensibilities more broadly.

Indeed the "little world" of street vendors, their leaders and the corrupt state officials that allowed them to sell in the center's streets seemed unfathomable to him. His clarification that he was not *malinchista* suggested that he indeed imagined an elsewhere, probably the United States, where these figures and their forms of political belonging would be unthinkable. Depicting them as part of world that was radically different from his own—progressive and forward looking—he partook of the perception of racialized incommensurability that I discussed in Chapter 3. But this figure of incommensurability was inseparable from the atavistic political forms that the vendors represented for him. I

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<sup>11</sup> Someone who favors things and ideas that come from abroad, especially the United States.

would like to emphasize the spatial and temporal imaginary visible in Andres's words. He and his vision for the country represented the future (which exists elsewhere), but the vendors, a powerful and amorphous force that he could not control, kept him anchored to the here and now. The latter appeared in this rendition not so much as the predecessors of citizenship and civil society, epitomized by new residents and by Carlos Slim himself, but rather as the latter's veritable antithesis.

Time and again street vendors emerged for new residents of the historic center as the prototypical representatives of clientelism, understood as an atavistic obstacle to modern forms of citizenship and belonging. And yet, as I argue in this chapter, such distinctions between clientelism and citizenship, past and future, did not map nicely onto the apparent dichotomy between street vendors and new residents. Instead, the street vendors exposed the illegibility between clients and citizens that was inherent to the position of new residents of the historic center themselves. This illegibility was perhaps most visible in their relation to the historic center's police, as I will discuss in the next section.

### **Slim's Police**

A national project to "recuperate" the symbolic heart of the nation for all Mexicans, the rescue constantly slipped into a private enterprise. This slippage was particularly accentuated in the security program implemented in the historic center in the context of this project, and more specifically in the areas to be targeted by renovation works. As I have mentioned before, this program included a newly created police force, the Citizens Protection Unit (CPU), deployed in the financial corridor. This force was composed of

young new recruits, with better training and equipment, as well as better salaries, and thus purportedly more efficient and less corrupt officers. Security also entailed the installation of more than a hundred closed-circuit security cameras at the majority of street corners as well as panic buttons at several intersections.<sup>12</sup>

Policing operations in the historic center were loosely based on the recommendations of Giuliani Partners, the ex-mayor of New York's private consulting firm, to the local government on how to fight crime and improve the image and the effectiveness of the police. In the following chapter I will discuss the actual content of these recommendations and their implementation in the center. For now I would only like to emphasize that from the start of the rescue Slim's staff were very involved in the design and implementation of policing operations, especially with regards to their technological components.<sup>13</sup> The command center, the office that coordinated all security measures in the area, was located in a building properly of Slim. His real estate company had lent it to the city's police department (the Secretary of Public Security) for an indeterminate period. The furniture in the command center, from desks to computers, were also properly of Slim's Foundation. There was a customer service type of office located on the ground floor of this building that was in charge of disseminating information about the security program. It looked like a branch of Telmex (Slim's telephone company).

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of Slim's intervention in the Giuliani "affair" see: Davis, D. (2007). "El factor Giuliani: delincuencia, la "cero tolerancia" en el trabajo policiaco y la transformación de la esfera pública en el centro de la ciudad de Mexico." *Estudios Sociológicos* 75: 649-681.

<sup>13</sup> The latter was as a purportedly bilingual unit that donned mariachi dress and rode horses, and was specifically trained to aid tourists.

In an effort to attract residents to their newly renovated buildings, the Foundation widely publicized these security measures among potential new residents. It organized weekly tours of the command center that consisted of a video overview of the security apparatus (in which tough policing was presented as the solution to the problem of crime in the center) and a detailed demonstration of its surveillance and video technologies. Crime rates had significantly dropped since the implementation of these measures, which, together with the thorough renovation of the area and the fact that streets were clean and well lit at night, contributed to the safety of the area. In the case of new residents, their close familiarity with and privileged access to policing operations also contributed to their perception that the historic center, and particularly the financial corridor, was safe. This perception of safety therefore rested in part on the illegibility of the role of the police or, in other words, in their slippage from public force to private security.

Take for example my first meeting with Luis, the young engineer whom I mentioned above.<sup>14</sup> It was an evening in April 2006, when I accompanied Armando to an art opening at a retail space on the ground floor of Luis's building, which was temporarily being used as an art gallery. Luis had already heard about me and my work and kindly offered to show me his building. He had recently won an award for its renovation. Armando came along. After a walk around the building, the three of us stood at the balcony of an empty apartment on the second floor, contemplating the beauty of the

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<sup>14</sup> Luis lived in a remarkable building that belonged to his s family. According to family lore, this three-story building, once a magnificent palace, had belonged to the family since the late eighteenth century, but neglected for decades, it was falling apart. After hearing about the new wave of private investment in the historic center, especially in real estate, Luis persuaded his father and other relatives to renovate the property into upscale housing. At the time of my fieldwork, most of the buildings' spacious studios and one-bedroom apartments were inhabited by single professionals (Luis included) and young couples.



place and looking at the hustle and bustle of the street underneath. “This is one of the safest streets in the planet,” Luis told me and pointed to five surveillance cameras in the corner. Armando was not so sure: “A car-stereo was robbed last night across the street”, he told us, which Luis seemed genuinely shocked to hear. “Either the thief was disoriented (*despistado*) or the police are getting a bit too relaxed,” was his reply. Armando explained that “at the beginning,” there were many different police officers in the center: Slim’s police, private police, public police. Luis again (I paraphrase from my fieldnotes):

When you were walking down the street [the police] would be watching you and informing by radio to their partners around the corner, so they would be waiting for you and also watching you, protecting you, making sure that nothing happened to you. Friends walking with miniskirts would have an escort of policemen, protecting them. And it really feels safe.

Luis then pointed at one of the cameras that had just moved in our direction and started waving at it, amused, with absolute nonchalance. It seemed that Luis and Armando perceived the police in the center as *their* police; a force working to make sure that *they* were protected. Luis’ gesture struck me as particularly odd, considering that surveillance technologies precisely depend on the public’s inability to know who or what is “watching” them. But Luis’ familiarity with the surveillance apparatus, his waving at the camera as if expecting someone to recognize him, suggested an intimate knowledge, or at least a performance of intimacy, with the “other side.” Later on it will become clear that the new residents’ relation to the police was more complicated than this gesture suggests, but for now I want to emphasize this image of the police as if it were a private security force.

The elusive distinction between public and private was also evident within the

police department itself, and it was often experienced with frustration. During my fieldwork at the command center the bureaucrats with whom I spent my time often insisted that Slim did not have a say over security operations. “Imagine!” replied Tomás, the bureaucrat who was present at the meeting that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, when I once asked him about Slim’s role in financing the police in the historic center. “No, no, no! Imagine! Telmex *should* not be involved, the security program, security, is of the state, not of individuals” (*los particulares*). But Slim’s influence was indeed felt in the command center every day and in the most disparate places: from the Telmex logo on the brochures promoting the security program, right next to the police’s own, to the constant supervision of his representative, vocally present at weekly staff meetings. Allow me to discuss a couple of scenes from my fieldwork to illustrate Slim’s appearance within the police.

One morning at the command center I chatted with Federico, a talkative man in his early thirties responsible for producing crime statistics, while he searched his computer for a survey that he had promised to give me. “What does [Slim’s representative] do at the meetings?” I asked him, referring to the weekly staff meetings, which I had not been allowed to attend. “She is the representative of [Slim’s security team],” replied Federico. “But what’s her role?” I pressed. “She reports to [Slim’s team] and on whatever she reports hangs my boss’s job [the command’s center director]”. “Why?” I continued my interrogation. “Have you ever been to the police department’s city-wide offices?” he replied, and without waiting for my response he continued to explain that they were in a deplorable state compared to the relatively comfortable offices in the center. “Why?” Federico asked rhetorically, “because here everything belongs to Telmex. Since Slim

could not have his own police,” he added with more than a tinge of sarcasm, “he subleased [us].” Slim’s representative entered the headquarters whenever she pleased, he complained, still in a sarcastic voice, and she always wanted to find their offices and desks in a tidy state.

Since the surveys were nowhere to be found on his computer, Federico suggested we go to his immediate boss’s office next door to continue looking in another computer. We had not yet even entered this office before Federico commented to his superior, the sarcasm escalating: “The *licenciada* here wants to know if Slim’s representative tells us what to do.” Visibly uncomfortable, the superior responded with a timid smile, but Federico continued to complain: a co-worker used to have a plant on his desk until [Slim’s representative] told him to get rid of it because she didn’t like it at all. Such side comments, and many other seemingly banal instances, gave palpable expression to the salience of Slim’s figure in the command center, which, in turn, had an impact on the bureaucrats’ perceived expectations of their work.

Moreover, Slim’s invisible presence in the command center was linked to the bureaucrat’s relation, often tense, with new residents. During one of my first days there Bety, an administrative assistant in her mid twenties and my most important contact there, introduced me to Tomás, the spokesperson who had participated in the Association’ meeting with which I opened this chapter. I mentioned that I had seen him there. “You are also a resident, then,” he replied, in a somewhat uncomfortable voice. I explained that I was living in the historic center to conduct an anthropological study on the rescue and he immediately assumed a more relaxed demeanor. This is my reconstruction of the conversation that followed, as paraphrased from my fieldnotes:

**Tomás:** We should feel proud that insecurity is no longer an issue for [new] residents. Not at all, but since [insecurity] has been resolved now they make tons of demands that are driving me crazy! (*me van a sacar canas verdes!*)

**Alejandra:** Like what?

**Tomás:** Like the issue of parking! They want these so-called parking permits, but we cannot give this to them. Imagine! They sometimes think that we are a private police, and this is the historic center, and there are regulations. We like helping them, that's why I tell them to call us and I give them our private numbers, but we cannot overlook the regulations.

Bety interjected to complain about Armando: "He calls Tomás almost every day and gets furious if he doesn't return his calls." And she continued her list of grievances about new residents. For example, that same morning a woman had called to complain because she was returning home from the supermarket and could not get through, since access to the center was blocked due to a demonstration.

**Bety:** So we have to call the [police] officers [and tell them] to let her enter. All things considered she is nice. She calls to thank us. But that's why people say that we are a private police force. (...) We're fed up with [new residents!]"

As this exchange suggests, there was uncertainty and exasperation among police bureaucrats regarding who they were expected to serve and how, an uncertainty that was traversed by the figure of Slim. But while new residents related to the police as their own private security services they themselves were also uncertain about and frustrated with their own relation to Slim, as I will explain in the section that follows.

### **Illegible Citizens, Illegible Clients**

"I work for Slim," said Arturo in a sarcastic tone. He was a forty-three-year-old architect and art dealer who opened a short-lived gallery in the cultural corridor. "What?

Aren't you independent?" was my confused reply, as I was under the impression that while he rented his gallery's premises (a beautiful nineteenth century three story mansion that he had renovated himself) from Slim's real estate company, his work had nothing to do with the Foundation. His answer (I paraphrase from my fieldnotes):

But everything I earn I pay to Slim, the rent [for his gallery], my cigarettes, my phone and cell phone, my coffee at Sanborns.<sup>15</sup> (...) I would like to move to the center, but if I did, I would be better off just transferring my entire earnings to Slim. I already pay him too much as it is!

As Arturo's remarks eloquently show, new residents were quite literally clients of Slim. Many were his clients as tenants, but all were clients of his telephone company (a monopoly in landline service, a near monopoly in mobile services), his restaurants and his stores. In this they resembled many of the city's inhabitants. But as Arturo's less than innocent joke suggests, the new residents' client position vis-à-vis Slim exceeded its literal commercial dimension and included, as well, a different relation of dependency.

As a patron Slim had many faces in the historic center. He was a generous sponsor of the arts who provided opportunities for young, emerging artists and for cultural producers, of whom there were many among the center's new residents. Through his influence and power, as we have seen in this chapter, he provided new residents with privileged access to state officials and the police, whether for requesting special parking permits or for circumventing the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the historic center. At the same time, he was perceived as a brilliant businessman, using artists as "guinea pigs" to foster his own private interests, and generating a certain confidence and optimism among investors and entrepreneurs. Whatever his motivations (love of the arts, patriotism, greed,

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<sup>15</sup> A very popular restaurant chain owned by Slim's group.

etc.), his very involvement generated an expectation that things would get done.

There was a common thread to all these perceptions: Slim was viewed as an all-powerful force. Consider for example the following exchange, taken from a group interview conducted at Eduardo's building with current and former residents two years after the break-in that I discussed in Chapter 2. Here the figure of Slim seems to merge with another contemporary omnipotent power:

**Omar:** Slim himself heard about [the break-in]. That's when they said, what do we do?

**Alejandra:** Slim heard?

**Omar:** Yes, yes...

**Lucía:** Of course, he hears about everything!

**Igor:** He is hearing us right now...

[Everybody laughs]

(...)

**Alfonso:** He is hearing us through Google earth...

[Laughter continues...]

Such immense powers no doubt incited anxieties, but for the clients of Slim-as-patron, they also provided reassurance. They presided over and authorized the new residents' quotidian negotiations in the historic center.

In the remainder of the chapter I will analyze new residents' doubled position as clients and citizens through a close reading of a story narrated by Armando, which brought together a couple of new residents, a group of street vendors and several policemen. It happened in the Spring of 2006 on the pedestrian street at the heart of the financial corridor where Armando and many other residents lived. This street had

supposedly been cleared of vendors a few years before. A great storyteller, Armando's narrative of this incident eloquently expresses the tension between, on the one hand, his construal of himself as a particular kind of citizen and his affective commitment to this political subjectivity and, on the other hand, his being at home in the forms of clientelism, personal relations and negotiation that he not only disavowed but cast as regressive.

Because of its richness I will take the liberty to quote the story in its entirety, in a number of different segments.



Figure 5. View of pedestrian street in the financial corridor, with no street vendors in sight. Photograph by author.

Let us recall that Armando made himself into an unofficial representative of new residents and, as such, served as a mediator between different people and institutions,

such as the police, the authorities and the Foundation. He was keen on boasting, although always in an indirect way, about his unrestricted access to the police, which he nonetheless expressed in the language of citizenship rights. In other words, while confident (or as we shall see expectant) that his relation to Slim granted him a special relation to the historic center's police, he construed his constant demands to them (demands that exasperated police bureaucrats) in terms of an individual exercising his rights to police protection. But I'm getting ahead of the argument. Let us turn to the story as Armando narrated it to me during an interview:

One Saturday afternoon, a blue-eyed güerita neighbor of mine had the ingenuousness of telling a street vendor in front of her house [on a pedestrian street in the financial corridor] selling pirate CDs, shamelessly camping with his family and all...

So she says: *"Hey, you know that you cannot be here, right?"*

And the vendor becomes hostile and starts telling her all sorts of unimaginable things and more, very intimidating, [such as] (he assumes an aggressive voice) *"What? Are you going to feed me?"*

To the point that [she was] left with two options, to cry and run, or to confront him, and she did confront him, I mean, very brave, she summoned two policemen (Interview with author, September 27, 2006)

Armando begins the story by establishing a distinction between his "blue-eyed güerita" neighbor and friend and the vendor selling outside her house, gesturing to the history of the racialization of class distinctions that I discussed in Chapter 3. He portrays his friend as standing on the side of civility and legality and the vendor on the side of disorder and violence. "Hey, you know that you cannot be here," the woman addresses the vendor, appealing to a presumed common knowledge of the law as an abstract principle that regulates encounter and conduct in public space and at the same time to the promise of rescue itself, which entailed the rescue of law (see Chapter five). And yet her



words also divulge an anxiety over this promise. Indeed, from Armando's standpoint, the vendor refuses to know the law, as he understands it. Instead he sells illegal commodities and denigrates public space, "shamelessly camping with his family." Even more worryingly from Armando's perspective, he resorts to violent intimidation. But Armando's friend stands her ground. Knowing her rights and responsibilities as a citizen, she summons the police.

And yet, in her very summoning of the police Armando's friend begins to slip into the position of the client, that is, she discloses her own location within the promise of rescue and her advantageous relation to the police. In this sense, her address to the vendor, "you know that you cannot be here" is also an assertion of her knowledge that street vendors no longer belong in the center. In other words, Armando's friend call to the police starts to appear as *both* an enactment of citizenship and an appeal to her special location within the rescue. The contrast between citizen and client starts to appear illegible. This illegibility increases as the narrative unfolds. "I'm passing by," continues Armando, who from this point onwards tells the story in the first person, his friend's voice disappearing:

**Armando:** ...and there are two vendor leaders with walkie-talkies standing in front of the building and the neighbor leaning against the door of the building, the *güerita*, and the leaders with their radios. [...] I take pictures. [...] So, they become hostile.

**Alejandra:** And the police?

**Armando:** Ah! I had already called the police chief. Two policemen were over there with the vendor, two leaders here with the radios... they talk over the radios and more than twenty vendors come running. At this point more policemen had already arrived. The sector's police chief himself arrived on his motorcycle, escorted by several

others. In less than five minutes there were twenty-five policemen and several vendors. Surrounding us.

What started as an assertion of citizenship and a civic act, namely calling the police to report transgression and violent intimidation, has taken the appearance of a street quarrel between two groups, each mobilizing its supporters. Tension mounts. Within a short time the vendor counts on the backing of his peers, including two leaders summoned by radio. The two policemen called in by the neighbor, on the other hand, silently witness the event, seemingly irrelevant to its unfolding. But, flaunting his own power Armando photographs the vendors (a common police practice) and summons the police chief himself, who arrives within minutes accompanied by scores of other officers. It is thus impossible to say, at this point, whether the police are there to mediate a quarrel between citizens or as reinforcements to back Armando and his friend in their personal confrontation with the vendors. The police, as mediated by the figure of Slim, appear not as the abstract bearers of law but as authorizing Armando's actions. As tensions climax, the story moves toward resolution without any explicit intervention by the police:

I say, I say to the leader: *"regardless of who is right in this situation what is not acceptable is to disrespect a lady, that is no way to speak to a woman."*

And so, [the leader] being a woman, she replies: *"the güero has a point here, the güero is right about this."*

So [she] forces the vendor to apologize to my neighbor. [...] And the leader realizes that they were making a big fuss and she says: *"curve your wings"* [that is, get going], and all the vendors leave. [...]

Because more police were arriving, our side started to get even more intimidating for the vendors. They realized that maybe they were making a big mistake intimidating who they should NOT intimidate, because A LOT of police arrived, and VERY fast, and on motorcycles, the ones who remove them, and then they thought: *"well, we made a mistake"* (Interview with author, September 27, 2006).

As Armando's police, the officers seem to authorize his negotiation with the leader. That is, the conflict is ultimately resolved through the personal and skilful exchange between the representatives of two groups, each with their forces at hand, and not through the police as mediators or as representatives of law. But at this point the narrative moves into another form of sociability and into a different temporal imagination. All differences notwithstanding, Armando suggests, everybody would agree that women should not be disrespected. He positions himself as a gentleman and as a protector of women, not precisely a cosmopolitan gesture.

Moreover, traversing Armando's boasting about his special powers of summoning, through which he purportedly can conjure massive police forces for his defense, is a deep suspicion that, after all, the police might not be on his side to begin with. It is this tension in the place of the police in the historic center, and specifically within the rescue project, that will stand at the center of the next chapter. For now, let us note that Armando establishes himself as a street-smart negotiator capable of fending for himself and of looking after his own.

As things started to calm down I said to the vendor's leader: *"look, any incident that any of my neighbors has with a vendor you will see me, unfortunately. They will call me, I will have to come, and it is going to be ugly. Why don't we avoid the mess and you give me your cell phone and, any incident with a neighbor, I will call you."* [...]

*"All right."*

She gives me her number and I give her my number, and now we have a direct line to the vendors' leaders, which, I mean, is nothing to be proud of, I wish they didn't exist, but if a problem arises, I know who to call (Interview with author, September 27, 2006).

Armando has opted to leave the police out, in effect suggesting that they are

incapable of dealing with the vendors. If he wants to get things done, he seems to be saying, if he wants to live in the historic center, he must engage with other forms of political negotiation and mediation; other forms of being a citizen. While he is at home in these forms of sociability, while he indeed boasts about his negotiating skills and about his now unmediated access to the illicit world of street vending, which appears as a source of power, he clarifies that this is “nothing to be proud of.” It would be better if they didn’t exist. The tension inherent in his position becomes clearest in his afterword to the story:

I know that we play an important role as citizens because if citizens don’t denounce [or report street vending], well, the police cannot act that easily. But it goes a bit beyond that. It is obvious that there is a corruption network and without political will, well, it is not going to end. In a way, [street vending] is disrespectful. It is disrespectful to those trying to do things right, those who pay taxes, those who want to contribute to society, to the historic center, to build a better society. And it is a bit like Mexican crookedness, you know, like, “not me,” right? “I take my own path and I do whatever I want.” To me it is like dishonest competition, it is opportunistic. All Mexicans, in some way, carry it integrated within their chip, cheating and corruption (Interview with author, September 27, 2006).

The point that I want to make now is that while appealing to a privileged access to the police and while also displaying remarkable negotiation skills, Armando never renounces to the position of “citizen” and casts the corporatist forms of belonging represented by the vendors as regressive and incommensurable. In other words, while the liberal discourse of citizenship is crucial in his own rendering of the incident, his narrative also reveals a much more complex picture where political belonging and citizenship take place through negotiation.

And yet it is his claim to a privileged position, and the presumptions that underpin it, that divulge how, in his narrative, “our” side refers at once to the abstraction of law

and to the beneficiaries of rescue. It is the street vendor, he implies, who has a corrupt and truculent crook within him, not “us,” enlightened modern citizens. And while in this he builds on the long history of class and racial tensions in Mexico, some of which I touched upon in the previous chapter, his narrative also shows how the contemporary fetishization of democracy and (particular forms of) citizenship has engendered new forms of exclusion. Armando can claim that it is he who possesses the civic competency to properly inhabit public space and to engage with a modern police, in contrast to the atavisms of the past. And yet, the crucial point is that he cannot be sure: he cannot be sure that the police are actually on his side, nor that the promise of rescue will be fulfilled. Most importantly, he cannot be sure that he doesn’t partake of “Mexican crookedness” and he cannot be sure that in invoking the abstract law of liberal democracy, he does not in fact invoke the privilege—and the constraints—of a client.

In this chapter I have argued that for Armando clientelism and patronage networks appeared as residual. They pertained to that large segment of Mexico which, according to the Foundation executive whom I quoted, was holding back the forward-looking, entrepreneurial Mexico to which both himself and Armando belonged. As such, clientelism signaled to another temporality that punctured new residents’ own cosmopolitan present. At the same time, I suggested, Armando was at home in a particular form of life in which personal relations and quotidian negotiations are indispensable and where being on the receiving end of special privileges (in this case vis-à-vis the police) can take the appearance of being a lawful subject, until the two positions become identical.

## **Chapter 5: The Rescue of Law**

### **Introduction**

The police, we have seen, were a crucial element in the rescue of the historic center, but they were a suspicious force as well. Armando was adamant that the police were on the side of law, but he also suspected that, despite claims to their reform, they were inefficient, corrupt and ultimately complicit with street vendors and their leaders (see Chapter 4). Likewise, Pedro doubted the police's capacity, despite their good intentions (and good looks), to handle the complicated problems in Regina and its surroundings, from petty crime and street violence to small drug dealing operations (see Chapter 2). While both Armando and Pedro felt protected by the police, they had serious doubts about their capabilities and their allegiances. In other words, whereas the police made it possible for both of them to live and work in the historic center, they also appeared suspicious and possibly irredeemable.

When I started fieldwork in early 2006, many new residents of the renovated area (as opposed to those new residents living in the cultural corridor) assured me that "insecurity" was no longer a problem there, thanks to the sophisticated security apparatus and the presence of a newly trained police. Despite the fact that the number of police officers patrolling the streets of the renovated area had decreased since the first years of urban renewal, new residents continued to place high hopes on the new police, and especially on their technological apparatus, for delivering order and safety. Contrast this confidence with a meeting that took place towards the end of my fieldwork, not long after

Pedro placed the URGENT NOTICE in the cultural corridor that I discussed in Chapter 2. In March 2007, a group of new residents got together for a breakfast meeting to discuss the deterioration of security in the renovated area, including the increasing presence of street vendors and other worrisome persons and activities.

About nine people showed up, among them Armando, Luis and Daniel. The talk of the day was a party that had taken place the previous weekend at Daniel and Camille's recently opened restaurant. Everyone was curious as to how the problem with the valet parking had been resolved. Daniel explained, rather annoyed, that it had taken until seven in the morning to find the car whose location the valets had not specified before leaving.<sup>1</sup> Luis intervened (I paraphrase from my fieldnotes): "We should not bring valets to the center, neither valets nor *franeleros* [informal parking attendants]."<sup>2</sup> They only bring trouble." Daniel agreed, but argued that for some events valets were necessary, especially when older people were in attendance. He claimed that his younger clients had no problem parking on their own, and as an example he mentioned a couple, friends of his, who parked on the street the night of the party. Then he added, with a tinge of irony, that their car stereo had been stolen. Luis blamed the *franeleros*, as he was convinced that they were responsible for several other thefts as well. Armando wanted to know: "Did [Daniel's friend] report the theft to the police?" Daniel didn't think so. "It was five in the morning", he replied. "They probably just went home."

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<sup>1</sup> Valet parking services often use the surrounding streets to park cars.

<sup>2</sup> As I briefly mentioned in Chapter 3 *franeleros* have different modes of operation. Some direct drivers as they park on the street and ask for a "voluntary" contribution from their drivers. Others set aside street parking spaces, usually with cardboard boxes, and demand money for their use. Some work alone and others work in organized associations, whose leaders offer protection in exchange for regular fees.

- Armando:** That is the problem, that people don't file police reports. You should tell [the command center's director] about the theft.
- Daniel:** But that's what cameras are for. Why do these things happen if there are cameras?
- Luis:** The cameras are useless. Surely no one is looking at them, surely they don't even know which is which. When you call and tell them [to look at] the camera on [a particular intersection] they go, which?

An anxiety over the absence of law transpired at the breakfast, both in the sense that disorder, illegality and criminality persisted (as we will see there were slippages between these notions) and in the sense that the police were not, after all, what the neighbors believed they would be. A few stolen car-stereos would hardly qualify the area as a criminal hot-spot in Mexico City, especially considering the high levels of criminality just a few blocks north and east of the renovated streets. But why would theft happen at all when hundreds of cameras were supposed to turn the renovated area into a thief-free zone? Weren't the police here supposed to be better, more efficient and non-corrupt? And didn't the law forbid *franeleros* from working on the city's streets? Indeed, like many other conversations that I documented during my fieldwork, that morning's talk about theft as well as about the ineffectiveness of the police registered a tone of disappointment over the broken promise of law. The conversation thus captured the entanglement of circulating discourses, personal investments and affective attachments to a particular ideal of the law, and the political subjectivities that correspond to it.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the discourse of rescue crucially mobilized the aspiration to eradicate disorder, illegality and criminality from the historic center. Law was both subject and object of rescue. While rescuing the historic center law would



itself be rescued from the people and practices that prevented its reign, such as, for example, street vendors and *franeleros*. This chapter explores the expectations, hopes and desires that new residents placed upon the rescue of law in the historic center, the promises that it held for them and the threats that it posed to them. I analyze how locally situated understandings of law and legality in the historic center intersected with broadly circulating discourses about “the rule of law” (*el estado de derecho*) in Mexico. At the same time I explore how, in reconstituting the law, the police must also represent the law, and hence how the rescue of law entails a rescue of the police themselves. I thus analyze how the police were construed as agents of rescue and at the same time as themselves suspect.

The problem of the rule of law is often discussed in relation to rising levels of disorder and criminality, on the one hand, and in relation to the police’s involvement in illegal and criminal activities. Indeed, corruption, violence and inefficiency have for a long time been trademarks of the police in Mexico.<sup>3</sup> The police have been an infamous institution known for their widespread use of torture and extralegal violence, their open involvement in criminal activities and their unlimited impunity. As one study about “police criminality” concluded:

It is evident that in Mexico the police intimidate. Particularly because lack of knowledge of what their intentions might be (there is a popular joke that it is better to be robbed by a criminal than by a police-criminal). It is known that they can and often do act against the law; it is known that they can commit almost any crime; but it is impossible to know if there is a limit to what they can do

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<sup>3</sup> For a history of the police as an institution in Mexico see: Vanderwood, P. (2002). “Los rurales. Una mirada a los orígenes de la policía mexicana.” *Renglones* 51: 73-83, Davis, D. E. (2004). Historia de detectives: rastreando a la policía de la capital en la historiografía política de México. *Los últimos cien años. Los próximos cien*. A. Rodríguez Kuri and S. Tamayo Flores-Alattore. México, D.F., Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana: 69-94.

(Martínez de Murguía 1999: 28).

In this context, police reform has become a fundamental issue in the agenda of democratization. Think-tanks and citizen groups working on police reform have proliferated, together with international conferences, expert reports, fact-sheets and consultancies all devoted to discussing the proper workings of policing in democratic contexts and how to attain an efficient and accountable police in Mexico.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the growing preoccupation with crime and insecurity has placed a double pressure on the police: demands for a more democratic and transparent police have overlapped with demands for tougher measures on crime, including the death penalty, and for faster results at any cost.<sup>5</sup>

Statistically speaking, the historic center had been a crime-ridden area. But it was also a space imagined to be dangerous, perhaps the most dangerous in the city, by broad segments of Mexico City's population. Its dangers exceeded petty crime and robberies, which at the times were cited as among the main preoccupations of the city's inhabitants.

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<sup>4</sup> Advocates of police reform demand the introduction of "instruments of control" and propose to replace the notion of "public security," centered around the idea of "public order," with "citizen security," considered as a fundamental right, and positioning the citizen at the heart of all "security" policies. Their central claim is that while the thrust of "public security" falls on the state, which acts independently of its subjects, "citizen security" relies on both the government and the governed. According to these arguments the problem of police violence, corruption and criminality would be resolved once the police is purified from its vices and once proper systems of accountability are implemented. For discussions about the police reform in Mexico see: Alvarado, A. and S. Arzt, Eds. (2001). El Desafío democrático en México: seguridad y estado de derecho. México, D.F., El Colegio de México, López Portillo Vargas, E. (2002). The Police in Mexico: Political Functions and Needed Reforms. Transnational Crime and Public Security: Challenges to Mexico and the United States. J. Bailey and J. Chabat. La Jolla, University of California San Diego: 109-191.

<sup>5</sup> This seemingly contradictory pressure is, to be sure, constitutive of a "democratic" police, which always combine "might and right", as I will discuss towards the end of the chapter. See: Benjamin, W. (1986). Critique of Violence. Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings. P. Demetz. New York, Schocken Books, Taussig, M. (1996). The Injustice of Policing: Prehistory and Rectitude. Justice and injustice in law and legal theory. A. Sarat and T. R. Kearns. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press: 19-34.

The center was dangerous because it was “dark,” “abandoned,” filled with street vendors, *franeleros*, prostitutes and a myriad of disorderly activities.<sup>6</sup> The space itself had to be recuperated, and in this recuperation, brought into the cosmopolitan present: from a new police to a new regime of visibility, to the eradication of disorderly practices, to the introduction of more efficient regulations.<sup>7</sup>

The rescue thus activated an image of the state recuperating a space taken over by illegality and criminality. But it was not as if law *per se* had been absent from the historic center. Quite the contrary, the historic center was a space constituted and traversed by an *excess* of law, both in the sense of sovereign authority—the space has been construed, let us recall, as the symbolic heart of the nation—and in the sense of rules and regulations. As I discussed in the introduction, its status as national heritage has placed the historic center within an exceptional legal regime, whereby any intervention upon the built environment is subject to complex and labyrinthine regulations and procedures involving both federal and local legislation and a myriad of different governmental offices – “A bureaucratic nightmare,” as an executive of the Foundation explained to me.

Likewise, the state was anything but absent from the historic center. The state was present in the myriad symbols through which it claims to be isomorphic with the nation: from Aztec ruins to the enormous flag that flutters in the middle of the Zócalo. It was present in institutional forms, from the National Palace, to the Senate and the Supreme

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<sup>6</sup> The term insecurity linked very different activities. There was petty crime in the form of street-level muggings and robberies of businesses. There were small drug dealing operations, called drug retailing (*narcomenudeo*). There was also contraband, counterfeit, prostitution and street vending.

<sup>7</sup> Security, and specifically zero tolerance style policing strategies, has been a central element in urban renewal projects across the world. For the case of Mexico City see: Davis, D. (2007). “El factor Giuliani: delincuencia, la “cero tolerancia” en el trabajo policiaco y la transformación de la esfera pública en el centro de la ciudad de Mexico.” *Estudios Sociológicos* 75: 649-681.

Court, and several federal and local governmental offices. It was present (although this was not a legitimate presence in the eyes of many new residents) in manifold political arrangements with street vendors, *franeleros* and other “informal” actors. What was at stake was not—or not only—the absence of law in the historic center, but the very meaning of law itself.

How should we understand, then, the meaning of law that emerges from an obsession with its alleged absence? In the introduction to *Figures of Criminality* (1999), Vicente Rafael poses the following question: “In whose eyes and under what conditions of looking do “crimes” and “criminals” appear?” He points to the fact that law and criminality are mutually constitutive: “just as the law is productive of crime, so is criminality an enabling condition for the materialization of the law and its powers of recognition” (p. 12). But his analysis moves beyond the “productivity” of crime. He asks:

Is crime always reducible to its social effects and harnessed to the production of social types? Does the disruptiveness inherent in criminality inevitably lead towards a conservative resolution? Must it always reiterate the power of the government and its legal institutions to determine the limits of sociality? (Ibid.)

Drawing on Rafael I would like to reflect on what kind of law appears through the figuration of the masses of informal street workers in the historic center, and particularly the *franeleros*, as “criminal.” The term that I most often encountered in the field in relation to informal street practices was “illegality” (ilegalidad). These practices were either explicitly described as illegal or otherwise framed in terms that signaled their illegality (as we saw in previous chapters, street vendors and *franeleros* were described as part of entrenched networks of corruption, or as not paying taxes). But as is evident in the breakfast conversation quoted above, the *franelero* oscillates between illegality and

violent criminality. Indeed, there is never a clear line between these notions in the figure of the *franelero*, but rather a continuum. The *franelero* epitomizes the disorder and illegality that prevails in the city's streets, but also the growing menace of violent criminality, and finally, too, the incompetence and corruption of the police. As such, he stands as the opposite of a lawful subject, that is, a subject oriented to and by law. But, as I will argue in this chapter, there is an excess of meaning in the figure of the *franelero* that marks the very limits of law in contemporary Mexico City.

Writing about discourses of transparency in Thailand, Rosalind Morris argues that 'transparency' emerges where 'class' disappears, that is to say, when social inequalities are no longer talked about in relation to the structural inequities of capitalism but rather in idioms of corruption and transparency. Such apparently minor change in terminology, Morris continues, "indexes a radical transformation in how the social is conceived."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, discourses of transparency are crucially mediated by a sense of being looked at from afar, or, in other words, by a preoccupation with the kind of image of Thailand that appears to the foreign gaze (Morris 2004: 227-228).

A comparable logic takes place in Mexico City with regards to idioms of legality and illegality, which are intimately linked to idioms of transparency and corruption. Borrowing Morris's formulation, I argue that in the context of Mexico's democratic transition, idioms of legality and illegality have come to replace idioms of "class." As

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<sup>8</sup> Morris argues that society's problems in Thailand, from incomplete highway constructions to electoral frauds, are thought about as resulting from lack of transparency, "wherever the discussion of social inequality was once explained by reference to the structural inequities inherent in the *sakdina* system or capitalism, it has been replaced by a rhetoric of transparency and corruption." Morris, R. (2004). *Intimacy and Corruption in Thailand's Age of Transparency. Off Stage/On Display. Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture*. A. Shryock. Stanford, Stanford University Press: 225-243., p. 227

Morris suggests, this shift in lexicon poses a temporal reversal. In the case of Mexico City, illegality—or the absence of the rule of law—emerges as the *cause* of all the city’s problems, for example, the proliferation of informal street activities, from vending to cleaning car windows or “watching over” vehicles. This shift is forcefully captured in the figures of the *franelero* and of the police officer on the street. The latter, as we will see below, bears a close resemblance to the former. Analyzing the slippages between illegality and criminality I argue in this chapter that the “criminal” produces a law that stands in the absence of “class.” Following Morris, I show that a doubled law (the law of liberal democracy and a revanchist law that cancels the fiction of equality) holds the promise of the cosmopolitan present while at the same time canceling this promise. Law—an orientation to and by law, equality, transparency, strong institutions—is imagined as that which will bring the lawful, forward-looking Mexico closer to Europe and the United State and at the same time as that which promises to eradicate the masses of the urban poor such as *franeleros* from view.

### **The Rescue of Law**

Back at the breakfast, Daniel narrated an incident with a man he called a homeless and a *franelero*, known as Porteño, who used to loiter outside his building and with whom he and many of his neighbors had an uneasy relationship. Daniel described Porteño as a usually harmless man who occasionally asked for money in return for watching over the neighbors’ cars. Armando once explained to me that despite Porteño’s “normal” attitude he sometimes didn’t “recognize [the neighbors] and [got] intimidating” due to his drug addiction. For example, Porteño one time threatened someone who came

to visit Armando as he was parking his car by telling him that he should not come to the center because something could happen to him or to his car there.

A cultured man in his early thirties, of refined manners and strong opinions, Daniel moved to the historic center in the Spring of 2001, during the very early stages of rescue. He heard about the project from Armando, his childhood friend, just a few months before he got married to Camille and the couple moved to the area shortly after their wedding. According to Daniel's own narrative, living in the historic allowed him to break from his previous life, and especially with his profession as a producer in the film and advertising industry, which he had grown tired and disillusioned with. In the center he yielded to his old-time passion for cooking and together with Camille, a recent college graduate, ventured into the restaurant business. After trying several alternatives, the couple renovated and re-launched an old restaurant on a pedestrian street at the heart of the cultural corridor, which they struggled to keep afloat, due especially to the lack of customers. Creative and resourceful, they came up with alternatives, such as organizing private parties or renting the premises for film productions. What follows is the story as told by Daniel that morning in March 2007.

A few days before the party mentioned at the breakfast, Daniel rented his restaurant for an all-night film shooting. As the film crew parked outside, Porteño asked them for money in exchange for "taking care" of their vehicles. As is customary, the film crew replied that they would give him some cash on their way back. But as it happened, the filming lasted until the following morning and the crew left without giving any money to Porteño. When Daniel was preparing to leave his restaurant and cross the street to his apartment, a furious Porteño knocked on his door and screamed for the money that he

claimed was owed him. Daniel refused while trying to close the door, but Porteño resisted and began to aggressively threaten Daniel, yelling that he knew where he and his wife lived and that they both would regret having messed with him. Daniel called the police's command center and, within a few minutes, several police cars arrived.

Daniel recalled, with a lot of frustration, that it took at least five police officers and a very long time to finally arrest Porteño and get him into a police car. Daniel narrated that after Porteño was finally subdued an officer told him, by way of an explanation, that policemen feared coming into physical contact with the homeless because they often have needles and could infect them with HIV. As Porteño fought his arrest, Daniel continued, he tore the uniform of a policeman and wounded another one in the head. But despite Daniel's insistence, the injured officer refused to accompany him to the Civic Court<sup>9</sup> to denounce the incident. If he went along, the officer claimed, he would lose several hours and his supervisor would refuse to pay him for that working day. When a few days after the incident Daniel talked to the director of the command center, this bureaucrat dismissed the policeman's claims as outright lies. He assured Daniel that it was certainly part of the responsibilities and risks of a policeman's job to come into physical danger. Likewise, he insisted that there was no way that a supervisor would deny pay to a wounded officer. But Daniel was not so sure that the police director was telling the truth. He strongly suspected that supervisors did indeed abuse policemen in this way.

Daniel continued his narration recalling that as the policemen struggled with Porteño, the noise woke up some of his neighbors. Sticking her head out of her window a

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<sup>9</sup> The Civic Judge presides over administrative misdemeanors.



friend of Daniel yelled at the police officers to stop abusing their authority and to immediately release Porteño. Daniel asked her to please stay out, to no avail. She continued to yell at the police, in turn waking up other neighbors. Daniel added that something very similar happened to him at the Zócalo. Noticing a man in the crowd inappropriately touch a woman, he summoned the police. But as they were arresting the man a passerby yelled at them not to be abusive. So Daniel intervened: “Do you have kids, missus? This guy has just inappropriately touched a woman (*manosear*). Would you like him to do that to your daughter?” The woman left without reply.

After finally subduing Porteño the police drove him to the Civic Court. Daniel followed along, and Porteño continued to threaten him in front of the judge, but now in flawless English. It turned out, according to Porteño’s own declaration, that he was a US citizen of Caribbean descent. He had left the US several years back because of unspecified problems. After submitting his own declaration, Daniel returned home and reported Porteño to the immigration authorities, via their website. But a few days later Porteño was back on the streets. Daniel had seen him several times already.

Daniel’s narrative forcefully captured his ambiguous relation with Porteño. Let us recall that until that day Daniel had experienced Porteño as a sometimes annoying, even mildly threatening man, but like the majority of his neighbors, he had been on good terms with him. In the story, however, Porteño slipped from an abject figure, a homeless drug addict who occasionally asked for money in exchange for rendering a “service”, to a truly menacing and violent one, which made Daniel feel vulnerable. After all, this was not an anonymous encounter. Porteño knew Daniel’s routines as well as the places where he and his wife lived and worked. The narrative thus marked a failure of intimacy between them.

The logic of the patron-client that underpinned Daniel's relation with Porteño had been suspended and, with it, the possibility of recognition.<sup>10</sup> I will return to the slippage from the *franelero* as a somewhat domesticated figure with whom one interacts to the *franelero* as a truly menacing figure, but for now I would like to focus our attention on another figure of the story, namely, the police.

Indeed, Daniel's story was not so much about the *franelero* as it was about the police in their relation to the *franelero* and, no doubt, in their relation to new residents. What stood out in the story, and in the breakfast meeting during which it was narrated (or rather re-narrated, as many were already familiar with it), were the types of concerns that neighbors expressed about the police. Daniel was not (or not only) complaining, as it is often the case, about police corruption, that is, about the police allowing *franeleros* to "work" in exchange for a "fee." The police in Daniel's story—at least the street officers who responded to his call—were acting according to law and due process:<sup>11</sup> they responded promptly to Daniel's call; they arrested the man who was engaging in a forbidden act—demanding money for cars parked on the street *and* threatening Daniel—and they turned him to the appropriate authorities. And yet, while seemingly acting according to law and procedure the police were unable to meet Daniel's expectations. He portrayed them, especially street level police officers, as an ignorant and incompetent bunch, incapable of efficiently subduing Porteño due to their fears of contagion (an issue

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<sup>10</sup> A similar logic underpins Siegel's discussion of stories of *kriminalitas* in Jakarta, in which, "those one knows turn out to be unrecognizable." Siegel, J. T. (1998). A new criminal type in Jakarta : counter-revolution today. Durham, N.C. ; London, Duke University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Here again I refer to the law as both the law of the sovereign (the force of law) and particular rules and regulations, in this case, the Civic Culture which I will discuss in detail in the next section.

to which I will return later) and to their lack of organization. He also described them as victims of abuse at the hands of higher-level officers, which only augmented their helplessness. In other words, the police appeared as worryingly out of joint with the rescue of law and with the cosmopolitan present they were charged with bringing about.

New residents were surely invested in the rescue of law in the historic center. Some had opened small businesses in the area, others had made their homes there, or were planning to buy property, under the assumption that at least a certain area, and eventually the entire historic center, would become more orderly, and that certain transgressions would simply not be tolerated. No street vendors would be allowed, no *franeleros*, no homeless people, and no graffiti. Moreover, legal procedures, such as obtaining permits for operating restaurants or for remodeling heritage buildings, would be streamlined and simplified. At the same time, new residents were under the assumption that the center had become, and would continue to be, safe.

But their investment in the rescue of law resonated with a particular imaginary of law and with the types of subjects they identified themselves as being: responsible, law abiding citizens. Not unlike Armando in the incident with street vendors that I discussed in Chapter 4, Daniel positioned himself in this story as a subject oriented to and by law: someone who abides by the rules, who values institutions and who respects the rights of others. The rescue of law in the historic center thus resonated with a wider discourse that emphasizes the need to modernize Mexican institutions in order to close the gap between the way things should work and actually existing practices.

In the introduction to *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony* (2006), Jean and John Comaroff have noted that just as crime and disorder appear to be on the rise in the wake

of neoliberalization, there is a renewed fetishization of law across the globe. In Mexico, an internationally circulating discourse about the rule of law, together with a series of demands stemming from international aid organizations to reform and streamline the judicial apparatus, has dovetailed longstanding anxieties about disorder, illegality and corruption. The absence of the rule of law, so goes a widespread assertion in public discourse, stands as an impediment of the country's full-fledged democratization. This imaginary entails spatial and temporal references: if only Mexico, and Mexicans, could be like Europe, or like the United States, presumed paragons of legality.<sup>12</sup> Recall how Tomas, the police bureaucrat whom we met in Chapter 4, commented that the neighbors used to tell him "that [the police in the historic center] should act like in Madrid, or like in Amsterdam."

Now contrast this image of law, citizenship and the cosmopolitan with another image from my fieldnotes. A managerial executive working to modernize the police in the historic center explained to me during an interview that it was difficult to enforce the law, especially the Civic Culture Act (which I will discuss in the next section). The reason was what he called the "deeply engrained" practices of the people living and working in the center, like washing sidewalks with soap or throwing trash: "If I stopped them [for doing these types of things] they would laugh at me," this bureaucrat told me. That very morning, he continued by way of illustration, the police immobilized the car of an elderly couple for parking in a forbidden spot. In no time a group of people gathered to

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<sup>12</sup> This imaginary reproduces the global talk about a legal developed world, and an illegal south and east, hotbeds of corruption. See: Taussig, M. (1999). *Defacement. Public Secret and the Labour of the Negative*. Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, Nuijten, M. and G. Anders, Eds. (2008). *Corruption and the secret of law: a legal anthropological perspective*. Surrey, Ashgate Publishing Limited.

defend the couple and to accuse the cops of abusing their authority. The officers held their ground and the group ended up in the Attention Center denouncing the “abuse.”

The bureaucrat presented this anecdote to illustrate the need to inculcate a culture of legality among Mexico City’s inhabitants. People who lacked respect for the police—and for the law itself—were, according to this bureaucrat, the most severe obstacle that law enforcement agents faced in the streets of the center. In the story that he narrated at the breakfast meeting Daniel too complained about people who obstructed the work of the police. Let us recall that both his neighbor and an anonymous woman in the crowd yelled at the police to stop abusing their authority without any real grasp of the context. Perhaps voiced from two different class positions, their antagonism towards the police nevertheless reflected a common perception in Mexico City that the police are always arbitrary and violent.

In the different versions of this incident that I heard before and after the breakfast meeting, some of Daniel’s neighbors expressed their concern about the unwarranted and excessive police force that had been used to arrest Porteño that morning. For example, in a version of the story as told by one neighbor (who claimed to have heard it from someone else) it was Porteño’s shirt that had been ripped during the fight, and not a policeman’s. Daniel, too, had expressed his opposition to police force in other occasions. In fact, when he left the breakfast meeting that morning, other neighbors commented that while he was now bitterly complaining about others interfering with the use of police force, he and Camille had themselves made similar objections during another incident, when Armando had called the police to report a group of kids loitering outside their building.

All this suggested that new residents, Daniel included, were ambivalent about the use of police force. But what was at stake in Daniel's narrative that morning was not the violence of the police (which he disavowed), but rather their ability to effectively enforce the law and deal with Porteño. Indeed, a lawful subject such as the one Daniel aspired to be would require a proper police—not only non-corrupt and well-intentioned, but also well-trained and effective. So despite all the evidence that he himself cited to the effect that they were truly incompetent, which suggested that it was he, and not the police who was out of joint with the realities of the historic center, Daniel could not but maintain his hopes on the police. Moreover, unlike his neighbor, who took it upon herself to defend Porteño from police abuse, Daniel depicted the *franelero* as a menacing figure. Porteño was dangerous and Daniel wanted him out.

In other words for new residents such as Daniel, Luis and Armando law holds the promise of a cosmopolitan present. It holds the promise of order and of clear rules and regulations. It holds the promise of subjects oriented to and by law, that is, subjects who would not throw trash on the street, who would not sequester public space for the benefit of the few, and who would not pay bribes to the police. As the law of liberal democratic ideology, it poses the fiction of equality, where everyone appears as the equal bearer of rights and responsibilities. But the law in which new residents are affectively invested—and indeed the "rule of law"—is doubled. It means more police and zero tolerance to transgression. It means the criminalization of illegality: no street vendors or *franeleros* in public space. It means creating the conditions for safe investment, at all cost. It is, to borrow Neil Smith's formulation, a revanchist law, where the fiction of equality is suspended and the criminal appears as beyond the pale of citizenship. The rescue of law

thus entails equality *and* clean, safe and orderly streets. And the dissonance between these two horizons is disavowed through idioms of legality and illegality.

### ***Franeleros and the Law***

Although a longtime source of frustration and anxiety for Mexico City's drivers, the legions of *franeleros* whose presence in the streets of the historic center preoccupied new residents at the breakfast meeting attained heightened visibility in the summer of 2004. That year, Mexico City's legislative body enacted the Civic Culture Act,<sup>13</sup> a controversial legislation based on Rudolph Giuliani's 2003 consultancy to the local government that aimed to curve "antisocial" behaviors in public space.<sup>14</sup> The aim of this law, according to then Secretary of Public Security (SSP) and its principal advocate Marcelo Ebrard, was to reduce criminality in the city. Specifically building on the "quality of life" approach to policing that Giuliani's report recommended, the Civic Culture Act linked and penalized such disparate "disorderly" activities as vending on the streets, informally watching over cars, cleaning car windows at traffic lights, painting graffiti or engaging in street prostitution.<sup>15</sup> What these behaviors had in common, besides

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<sup>13</sup> Mayor López Obrador first introduced the Civic Culture Act to the local assembly in December 2002. It was voted down and a modified version was introduced in December 18, 2003. This was finally passed in May 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Mexico City's government hired Giuliani Partners, the private consultancy firm founded and owned by New York's ex-mayor, in October 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Giuliani's "quality of life approach" sustains that crime and disorder are intimately intertwined. Tolerating minor offenses and infractions creates the conditions for more serious crimes to occur. Thus, emphasis shifts from "fighting crime" to "keeping order" and to "policing everyday life." Following this logic, the Civic Culture Act almost doubled the number of punishable "administrative infractions" (from 22 to 43) involving loitering, soliciting and panhandling, and established harsher penalties ranging from fines (of up to 30 daily minimum-wage salaries) to administrative arrests (of up to 36 hours). For critical analyses of Giuliani's "quality of life" policies in New York see: Smith, N. (1998). "Giuliani Time: The

their putative disorderly nature, was that they happened in public space. In a document outlining Giuliani's recommendations to the public Ebrard presented the issue as follows:

In the past few years the number of people who make the street (*vía pública*) their workplace has multiplied exponentially, be they the *franeleros* who use objects to reserve parking spaces and then charge money for their use, or the windshield cleaners, who impose an unsolicited service. The fact is that both cases constitute a problem for the city's inhabitants (SSP 2003: 39).

The Civic Culture Act was the most spectacular, and the most controversial, result of Giuliani Partners' consultancy, which from the start was mired in controversy.<sup>16</sup> The consultancy was proposed by a group of prominent business people, most notoriously Carlos Slim, who also footed its 4.3 million dollar bill. Besides the issue of who paid for the consultancy, critics—from business associations to non-governmental organizations—expressed concerns about the viability of Giuliani's model of policing for a place like Mexico City. Some pointed to the endemic corruption of the police, or to the complexities of the megalopolis, or to persistent social inequalities. Others decried that again Mexico's elites—in this case the business sector and the city's elected officials—looked for solutions abroad (*en el extranjero*). Likewise, human rights organizations, numerous public intellectuals and opposition politicians criticized the Civic Culture Act

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Revanchist 1990s." *Social Text* 16(4): 1-20, Feldman, A. (2001). "White Public Space and the Political Geograpy of Public Safety." *Social Text* 19(3): 57-89.

<sup>16</sup> While the Civic Culture Act was the most visible and most controversial product of Giuliani's Report, the bulk of his recommendations concerned the modernization of the police. According to the report, what the city required was a modern police, with modern technologies and modern training. This modernization entailed the introduction of information technologies, such as the centralization of crime data collection and production of statistics, and the constant sharing of this information between different sectors. Other recommendations concerned the implementation of efficiency and anti-corruption measures. Modernization also included the organizational re-structuring of the police according to managerial efficiency models. (Reporte Giuliani, SSP, 2003)



for its “repressive nature” and its “criminalization of poverty.”<sup>17</sup>

The Act went into effect in August 2004 with a spectacular crackdown on *franeleros* and windshield cleaners, especially in heavily commercial areas such as the historic center or other central neighborhoods with a high concentration of large corporate offices and retail and leisure spaces. These operations generated great expectations amongst Mexico City’s drivers. “Mexico City’s government launches itself against *franeleros*,” read a headline of *Reforma* newspaper on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2004, the day before the law went into effect. “War against *franeleros* starts tomorrow”, read a headline in *El Universal*. As the pros and cons of the Civic Culture Act and of the crackdown itself were discussed in the press, anxieties and fantasies about *franeleros* intensified. And although their media presence has diminished from the hyper- visibility they attained in 2004, they continue to figure prominently in discussions about informality, illegality and criminality, together with street vendors and other informal occupants of public space.

The mass media generally depicts *franeleros* as an uncontrollable plague and as a powerful mafia, which resonates with the views of new residents of the historic center (and indeed of many people I know in Mexico City). Newspaper reports and editorials

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<sup>17</sup> Take, for example, a letter to Ebrard written by a prominent police reform and human rights campaigner after the SSP publicized Giuliani’s recommendations in 2003:

“Perhaps the greatest disadvantage of the approach is the pressure it places on the police to solve problems that are largely beyond its competence to resolve. Indeed, in the area of public order and regulation of the uses of public space, the differences between New York and the Federal District are most pronounced. Mexico City’s hundreds of thousands of *franeleros*, windshield wipers and ambulatory vendors are a reflection of a massive informal sector that has no real counterpart in New York (whose “squeegee men” totaled less than 200 when Mayor Giuliani ordered his crackdown on them). Their significant presence is virtually guaranteed by the weaknesses and inequities in the District’s economy and local public administration — problems that are neither the fault of the police nor overly susceptible to their efforts, Mr. Giuliani’s recommendations notwithstanding. Under such circumstances, the consequences of criminalizing the lifestyles of last resort are difficult to predict, but unlikely to be sustainable or an unalloyed benefit for the city. (Varenik, Letter to Ebrard, October 2003)

portray their activities as a greatly lucrative business based on obscure corruption networks that involve *franeleros* and their leaders, police officers and high-ranking government officials. The consensus is that *franeleros* illegally profit from privatizing—some called it kidnapping—public space, thus contravening the rule of law. Moreover, they are suspected of partaking of, or at least abetting, criminal car-theft networks. It goes without saying that there is little public discussion and very few media reports about the working conditions and the kinds of problems that *franeleros* face on the streets, or about the types of extortions they endure on a daily basis.

Take, for example, an opinion piece from the widely read newspaper *El Universal*, published in January 2006. The author describes *franeleros* as an “entrenched urban virus” that, since its appearance at the turn of the twentieth century, has slowly taken possession “of the ‘virginity’ of our streets, turning Mexico City into the biggest for-pay parking lot in the world.” According to this editorial, informal car watching is:

One of the biggest informal businesses in the history of the city, [which generates] millionaire profits, and [propitiates] a pyramid style corruption, that goes from traffic officers to state officials, and even *delegados* (borough presidents) (Bazán 2006).

The author declares having received more than “372 emails” regarding *franeleros* since 2002, in which readers “bitterly complain” about the “outright theft” of informal car watching, to which state authorities “turn a blind eye.” He refers to the contents of two such letters. The first is from a woman who conducted research on *franeleros* in a southern district of the city for her Master’s thesis:

Each *franelero* confessed making an average of 800 pesos every day, which, multiplied by more than 50 of them operating in this area, generates the not insignificant sum of 40 thousand pesos per day, which, in a year, adds up to more than 14 million, 600 thousand pesos in [a southern neighborhood] only! (Ibid.)

The second is from a man who reports receiving death threats from a group of *franeleros* after refusing to pay them for parking outside his home:

After refusing to pay the daily sum [that *franeleros*] demanded, his car has been stoned and damaged, and now even his life is at risk for parking on the streets, whose ownership, at least in theory, has not been transferred to a group of criminals (*hampones*) (Ibid.).

Not unlike Daniel's story with Porteño, there is a slippage in these narratives between illegality and violent criminality in the figure of the *franelero*. From being someone who engages in illegal activities, the *franelero* turns into an outright criminal. But anxieties about the *franelero* also reveal drivers' ambivalent relation to him, as I suggested in Chapter 3. He is an unsettling figure; someone with whom the car-driving middle classes enter into fleeting and sometimes not-so-fleeting interactions on the street, in which the provision of a "service" is involved. In other words, while the *franelero* is dreaded he is at the same time needed. For example, drivers, especially in heavily commercial areas, often prefer to leave their cars with *franeleros* than to pay the high prices of parking lots. In areas with high concentrations of office buildings, drivers sometimes pay weekly fees to *franeleros* to watch over their cars during their workday, and even entrust them with their car keys. In this sense, *franeleros* destabilize class relations in Mexico City. They occupy middle class spaces, but they do not always do so in a relation of dependency. They therefore occupy an ambiguous position between the subservient subordinate and the menacing criminal.

In other words, interactions between drivers and *franeleros* are shot through with ambivalence. Let us return to the historic center to explore this ambivalence further. Juan and Carol were a couple who moved into Armando's building after they married in 2005.

During an interview that I conducted with both of them at their home in February 2007, Juan, an architect in his early thirties, talked about his fascination with the street life of the historic center and with the multiplicity of characters and scenes that he encountered there on a daily basis. Carol, in her late twenties and also an architect, did not share this fascination and talked about the historic center as a dangerous place. Allow me to quote extensively from this interview, as it forcefully captures the ambivalence of the *franelero* and the specific conundrums of the historic center's new residents vis-à-vis this figure:

- Juan:** At first they think you are crazy, right? I mean, you sit to get your shoes shined and that's it, right? You return the next day and they look at you strangely, I mean, "What's this guy doing here?" and later "Whassup, how are you", or you bring your shoes [and tell them]: "bring them upstairs, [when you finish and leave them] with the porter." And that's the point where I think they give in. At first I think they do put a certain barrier, even the *franeleros*, this big guy...
- Carol:** Yes, at first he was aggressive, like, (with an unfriendly tone): "Ay, the guys from the [renovated] building..."
- Juan:** And now, I mean, I leave them the keys to my car...
- Carol:** (With a disapproving tone) Yes!
- Juan:** Yes, I swear. One Sunday I arrive to pick up Carol, horrible traffic. (...) There is no parking. He stops me [and says]: "I park it for you". I leave him my car keys. I return and he had even bought me a coke, I mean, a really nice guy. If I tell this story at Carol's [parents] house, they would tell me: "Are you crazy or what?" (...) Now, you must keep some mistrust. I think this is a basic rule; one thing is that they don't do anything to you, or that they have certain codes, but you also must get their codes, respect them. And also, well, try to blend in. But they perceive you as different. That's a fact. I mean, for example Daniel, I mean, he is a person who looks different. Armando is a person who looks different. (...) I mean, in the end, I think that ultimately all of us who are here, I mean, we all look kind of different. (...) The point is to not have a fall out, so it won't get worse. I mean you mark your limit the same way as they mark their limit. There is a relationship and that's it. To go beyond that, I don't think so, and besides it is not necessary, right?

I mean, for example, the guy who is a shoeshine, we didn't know, I thought he lived in the center, he gets here at 7:30 in the morning to polish shoes, [so I thought that] he must live around here. It turns out he lives in [the periphery]. I ask him: "Hey! I brought my shoes last Friday and you weren't here." [He replies]: "No, I got it really bad! I got a bad beat-up in my hood (*barrio*), and, well, I was gravely ill," and I don't know what, and Carol gets (uncomfortable). Like why...

**Carol:** ...are you telling me this?

**Juan:** Yes, I mean, there is a certain closeness, but up to a certain limit, right?

Throughout the passage that I quoted (and indeed throughout the entire interview), Juan and Carol differ on how they present themselves as individuals and as a couple. Juan emphasizes his fascination with the historic center's sensual excesses, its publicity, and its characters. Carol, in contrast, describes it as a difficult place to live, with multiple layers of danger and potentially unpleasant encounters always looming nearby. To be sure, these discrepancies betray a gendered experience of the city and its perils, with Carol feeling more vulnerable than Juan—and feeling more at ease with expressing this vulnerability—during her encounters with the *franelero* or the shoe-shine. Towards the end of the passage, however, their perspectives converge and Juan agrees with Carol: one should not get too close to them, "you mark your limit the same way as they mark their limit."

Indeed, Juan's attraction to the street-characters of the historic center (the transvestite, the shoeshine and the *franelero*) and his fascination with establishing quotidian relations with them goes hand in hand with his (and Carol's) fear of an excess of intimacy with them. While Juan desires closeness (e.g., he asks the shoeshine why he was absent) he also wants a limit that must never be transgressed (he does not need to

know that the shoeshine was badly beaten-up in his neighborhood). Perceived by Juan and Carol as a harmless and picturesque inhabitant of the area the shoeshine turns out to stand for a far more violent reality, of which they would actually prefer not to partake. It is as if the logic of the patron-client upon which Juan's relationship with these street figures depends would collapse with an excess of intimacy.

A few days before the breakfast meeting that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Armando had already told me the story about Porteño threatening Daniel. As he was telling me the details of the story, I asked him if the police had indeed arrested Porteño that morning. Armando replied, in his characteristic lecturing tone (I paraphrase from my fieldnotes):

What happens is that there is a law that was made when Ebrard was Secretary of Public Security, which is like Giuliani's law in New York, in which you can be detained for cleaning windshields, for everything. At the beginning they detained *franeleros*, prostitutes, street vendors, but then it happened that Ebrard was removed because of [a lynching incident in a different area of the city], and this law was forgotten, but now it is a good moment to do something about it again.

While the rescue of law thus proclaims the promise of the cosmopolitan (indeed, in the quote above, of New York), the *franelero* locates new residents in the here and now of Mexico's class hierarchies. In other words, the cosmopolitan present to which new residents aspire to is at once predicated upon and undone by the exclusion of the *franelero*. As we have seen throughout the chapter the talk about *franeleros* reaches levels of panic and hysteria. He is described as committing acts of extortion, as a car thief, or as part of lucrative corruption networks. The consensus is that *franeleros* benefit while law-abiding citizens pay the consequences of corruption. Indeed, there is an excess of meaning in the *franelero*. The very sight of this urban figure generates anxieties about

the total collapse of the urban order.

### **Intimacy, Contagion, Corruption**

As we have seen, anxieties about the *franeleros* were inseparable from anxieties about the inefficiency and corruption of the police, especially of street-level police officers charged with enforcing the Civic Culture Act. At best, such police officers were said to be ignorant of the specifics of the law and of the procedures for arresting *franeleros* and taking them to Civic Courts, as was painfully evident to Daniel during his confrontation with Porteño. Let us recall that it took more than five officers to detain the homeless man, as they were afraid he would infect them with HIV. At worst, they were thought to be extorting *franeleros* or to be in on the “multimillion dollar” business of watching over cars.

This should not be surprising. Drawing on Benjamin, Taussig argues that the police are not and cannot be subject to law. They are constitutively suspended from both law-making and law-founding forms of violence. Policing, he writes, “is that enigmatic power arising from its immersion in and constant contact with contagion, with the tabooed, thus partaking of the properties of corruption itself” (Taussig 1996: 20). Taussig’s aim is to destabilize the idea that the police in the United States,<sup>18</sup> that is, in a liberal democratic context, abides by the law, in contrast to other, distant places, where police corruption and violence are rampant.<sup>19</sup> He wants to bring “home” the notion of the constitutive

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<sup>18</sup> The article I’m referring to discusses a case of corruption within the New York Police Department.

<sup>19</sup> Here Taussig draws on Benjamin’s argument that it is particularly in the institution of the modern police that the “rotteness” of law attains its most ignominious manifestation. For Benjamin, the police are always suspended between law-preserving and law-making violence. This contradiction becomes especially palpable in what he calls “civilized states,” regimes purportedly committed to drawing a clear distinction

violence and corruption of the police: “we do not at first think of war in foreign lands where the exotic and the horrific loom large when we think of the police—‘our police.’ As we are wont to say” (Ibid.). But the policeman that appears in Tausig’s argument, even as he is intimately connected to the criminal, is different from him: “It’s not that cops are thieves, too! No! I insist on the difference. If they’re thieves, then they’re ‘cop-thieves’” (Ibid: 22). In other words, Taussig argues that in their “unholy” alliance, cops and thieves, the police and the criminal, constitute each other as different from each other, even as the line that separates them is always ambiguous.

Yet something different from an unholy alliance between the “police” and the “criminal” is at work in Daniel’s depiction of the police as an incompetent, gullible and ignorant bunch incapable of dealing with a homeless *franelero*. Let us recall that Daniel narrated, in a rather annoyed voice, how a policeman explained that he and his peers feared the homeless because the latter could infect them with HIV. In other words, Daniel’s narrative exuded more than mere anxiety about police corruption. I do not mean to disavow the very real problem of police violence, which still prevails in Mexico City, as well as the problem of corruption. But I want to direct our attention to an issue which appeared more pressing for new residents of the historic center (in a context where police corruption, although seen as a problem, was not the most significant issue). What Daniel’s words suggest is that the police are not entirely different from the *franelero*. It is as if they partake of similar traits, which Daniel cannot fully fathom.

A similar anxiety appears in the following newspaper report on policemen working

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between these two functions or, in other words, where the police supposedly engage only in law-preserving, never in law-making violence. Benjamin, W. (1986). Critique of Violence. Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings. P. Demetz. New York, Schocken Books.



as *franeleros* in Mexico City's metropolitan area:

Although their job is to guard the Agrarian Tribunal, two state policemen make the most of their time there, allowing drivers to park in a forbidden area, in exchange for a few pesos.

[The policemen] don't wear the orange vests or the name tags that [state authorities] provided to the *franeleros*. In their [police] uniforms, consisting of black pants and white shirts, they also "direct" (*echan aguas*) drivers and extend their hands to receive a tip.

Although the sign that forbids parking in the area is very visible, one of the officers declares that he allows the use of those spaces because the area is very chaotic: finding a place to park can take up to 30 minutes.

"(I let them) because there is no parking, I only provide this service so it is quicker to go in and out [of the Tribunal] and [drivers] will leave in less time and they won't double park" (Ibarra 2004).

We find in this story no doubt a sense of the cop-thief as Taussig talks about it, that is, of the policeman using his authority to profit from allowing drivers to park in forbidden spots. But something other than a fallen cop is at stake in this episode. Here the policeman turns uncannily similar to the *franelero* (as well as to others who make a living working in the street's informal economy). It is not so much that in their proximity the two constitute each other as different, as Taussig would have it, but that they come to appear indistinguishable. The policeman reveals himself as a *franelero*. What I'm suggesting, then, is that the policeman on the street slides into the dangerous *pueblo*, the urban rabble. He comes to resemble the masses of the urban poor that he is charged with policing. For example, the same managerial executive working to modernize the police in the historic center whom I quoted above explained to me during an interview that police officers on the ground were ill-prepared for handling the problem of informality and illegality in the streets. He expressed concern over the intimacy between the police officers on the ground and those who make a living working in the city's informal

economy:

Their daily interactions (...) in the street become a problem, because they establish very close relationships. The woman selling food snacks (*garnachas*) gives [police officers] a food snack, they exchange presents in December.

The point to be made, then, is that at his most “cosmopolitan,” legal and orderly (and hence in his farthest form from the *franelero*) the policeman on the street would be invested with the metaphysical distance of law (of liberal democracy) and with an aura of honor and duty. Let us recall Derrida’s argument that the police are more than policemen in uniform. They are “present or represented everywhere that there is force of law. They are present, sometimes invisible but always effective, wherever there is preservation of the social order” (Derrida 1990: 1009). At its farthest from the *franelero* the police would enforce the Civic Culture Act and would keep out street vendors from the historic center. Indeed, the problem with a democratic police is not whether they follow a transcendental law, as they necessarily stand outside and inside the law in what Taussig calls the “metaphysical warfare” of the police. But, as Slavoj Žižek might put it, they work as an institution in such contexts because citizens act “as if” they are the ultimate bearers of law.

But the policeman on the street, we have seen, is suspiciously similar to the *franelero*. He slips into the dangerous masses that dwell in the city’s streets and he cannot be trusted. For Daniel, the problem seems to be that he doesn’t know what side the police are on and whether they are at all fit for the demands of a cosmopolitan present. Daniel’s anxiety, then, is not that the line separating the police and the criminal will collapse, but that it was never there to begin with; not that corruption will ensue but that the policeman—the figure upon which the rescue depends—has always already been as

irredeemable as the *franelero*.

## Chapter 6: The Return of the Masses

### Introduction

On Sunday July 30, 2006 Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), the presidential candidate of a center left coalition that included the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) addressed hundreds of thousands of people who gathered in the historic center. He was disputing the results of the recent presidential election. It was the third weekend in less than a month that protesters packed the Zocalo and its surrounding streets to denounce electoral fraud and to demand a full ballot recount.<sup>1</sup> That day I was supposed to meet Victor, a visual artist living on Regina Street who was an enthusiastic supporter of AMLO, in a roof terrace restaurant overlooking the Zocalo. Offering a panoramic view of the square, this was a preferred meeting place for high-up members of the PRD

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<sup>1</sup> On the night of the election, the results were too close to call but Felipe Calderon, the candidate of the governing Democratic Action Party (PAN), was declared winner a few days later, by a margin of less than half a percentage point. On July 6 AMLO declared that he would contest these results at the Electoral Tribunal, the institution in charge of resolving electoral disputes. He claimed that an “old-fashioned” fraud had been perpetrated, by which he meant that, besides the negative campaign waged against him during the runoff to the election (with the president openly supporting his party’s candidate in violation of electoral law), the ballots themselves had been tampered with. AMLO and his staff mounted a doubled strategy to contest Calderon’s victory. On the one hand they presented their case to the Federal Electoral Tribunal, offering proof of irregularities in several polling stations and demanding that all votes would be recounted. On the other hand, they called for massive demonstrations all over the country that would converge in Mexico City’s historic center. The first demonstration took place on July 8, a week after the election. According to the organizers it had a turnout of more than half a million people. The number of protesters increased in a second demonstration held on July 15 and on the third demonstration, held on July 30<sup>th</sup>. The aim of these demonstrations and of the *plantón* (sit-in) that ensued was to demand that the Electoral Tribunal ordered a full ballot recount. On August 5<sup>th</sup> the tribunal ordered a partial recount and 11,839 ballot boxes were opened and the votes recounted, with no significant alteration of the previous results. On September 5<sup>th</sup> the Tribunal presented a 309-page final decision on the election, validating the results and officially declaring Calderon as president elect. The document recognized that there had been irregularities and illegal conducts (most notably by the president and business groups) during the campaigns but declared that their effects on the results could not be measured. For a detailed analysis of the post-election crisis and AMLO’s strategies see: Aziz Nassif, A. (2007). "El retorno del conflicto. Elecciones y polarización política." *Desacatos. Revista de Antropología Social*(24): 13-54.

as well as sympathetic intellectuals and journalists during the post-election protests.

Before leaving my apartment that morning I could already hear the sound of the crowd, which got louder and louder as I walked towards the intersection of Juarez Street and Eje Central, where I paused to watch the demonstration, headed by AMLO himself, as it moved towards the Zocalo. A sea of people walking shoulder to shoulder loudly proclaimed their support for their candidate as they crossed Eje Central onto Madero Street (the central street of the financial corridor). Multiple organizations affiliated to the PRD walked in large groups, donning yellow shirts (the color of their party) and carrying printed signs that read: “AMLO hang in there, the people are rising up.” There were musicians playing drums, families with children, and people of all ages holding balloons, Mexican flags and banners bearing the most disparate condemnations of outgoing President Fox,<sup>2</sup> candidate Calderon and the Federal Electoral Institute, the de-centralized institution charged with organizing and overseeing elections in Mexico:

“Fox, traitor of democracy”

“My country hurts”

“Democracy, R.I.P., July 2nd”

“Calderon what do you fear?”

After a while I tried to make my way towards the Zocalo to meet Victor at the rooftop terrace restaurant, but the sheer density of the crowd prevented me from moving forward.

I finally settled in a spot on Madero Street, just a few blocks west of the Zocalo, in front

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<sup>2</sup> Having defeated the PRI as the candidate of the National Action Party (PAN) in the 2000 presidential election (and after seven-decades of one-party rule), Vicente Fox became the symbol of Mexico’s “transition to democracy.” AMLO supporters thus depicted him as the worst kind of traitor. Someone who, instead of consolidating the transition, had reverted back to the fraudulent practices that he had fought against.

of a giant screen that would broadcast AMLO's speech. From a stage placed at the eastern edge of the Zocalo, in front of the National Palace, and against the deafening noise of the crowd screaming "you are not alone, you are not alone," AMLO began to speak. Repeating a theme that he often used during the campaign, he declared that he was committed to defending democracy and the will of the country's citizens:

What is being decided these days is whether we once and for all establish a true democracy in Mexico, or whether a regime of democratic simulation will be imposed, one where the privileged of old will ultimately continue to decide the nation's destiny.

AMLO denounced what he claimed was a fraud intended to "falsify the citizen's will" as it had been expressed on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. "We have the certainty," he continued, "all the elements and proofs to assert without hesitation that we have won the Presidency of the Republic." The crowd erupted in thunderous cheers and applause and began to chant what had become the slogan of the post-election protests:

"Vote by vote, polling booth by polling booth."

"Vote by vote, polling booth by polling booth."

"Vote by vote, polling booth by polling booth."

He asked everyone to listen attentively to what he had to say next and to respond only after careful consideration. There was silence before he continued: "I propose that we stay here, that we remain day and night, until all votes have been counted, and we have a president elect with the minimum legality that all Mexicans deserve." Everybody around me on Madero Street was staring at the giant screen, which showed a close up of AMLO, in absolute silence, their faces betraying confusion. "Is he saying that we remain here?" said an old woman standing next to me and looking around, as if expecting an

answer from her fellow protesters. “On the streets or on the sidewalks?”

AMLO proceeded to lay out a detailed plan to set up multiple *campamentos* (encampments) that, starting at the Zócalo, would continue in a long line out of the historic center along Madero and Juárez streets, and would occupy a large segment of Reforma Avenue, the broad and elegant tree-lined boulevard that houses important financial institutions, corporate headquarters, hotels, embassies, government offices, and museums. Representatives of the thirty-one states would camp at the Zócalo, he suggested, while protesters from Mexico City’s sixteen administrative districts would occupy the rest of the proposed route on Madero, Juárez and Reforma.

AMLO asked the crowd: “Should we stay? Yes or no?” Although a loud “yes” was chanted in reply, there was tension in the air. He had taken the crowd by surprise. “I will ask again differently,” he continued, “those who are for staying, raise your hand.” Some chanted, “Yes, we are staying! Yes, we are staying!” Many raised their hand, rather undecidedly. “Those who don’t agree, raise your hand.” No hands were raised. “Abstentions?” Again no hands. “We are staying!” Thus began the forty-seven day long *plantón*<sup>3</sup> that literally and metaphorically divided the city—and the country—in 2006.

People began to disperse shortly after AMLO’s speech, many trying to find more information about the proposed *campamentos*. I called Victor’s cell phone to comment upon what had just happened. “Where are you? Did you hear the speech?” he asked me before I had the chance to say hello. “I don’t know what to make of it,” he continued. “Has this man become crazy?” I told him that it was indeed an unexpected move and that

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<sup>3</sup> The term *plantón*, which could be translated as a sit-in, refers to a form of popular politics that consists in occupying (usually) public plazas for days, weeks or months to voice particular political demands.

AMLO would probably lose a lot of supporters because of it. A few days later I ran into Victor at Culture Space. He was chatting with Bernardo. They were both convinced that such a large-scale *plantón* meant political suicide for AMLO: “Now people can say that he was [after all] ‘a danger for Mexico,’” Victor said, referring to the negative campaign slogan that had been used by the PAN candidate (to which I will return below). Victor and Bernardo’s support for AMLO, like that of many other people I knew in the historic center, dwindled as the weeks went by. Indeed, neither they nor any other new residents who had voted for AMLO and had participated in the post-election demonstrations took part in the *plantón*.

That very same evening improvised *campamentos* began to appear on the Zocalo and along the eight-kilometer route proposed by AMLO. Protesters set up tents or used ropes and sheets of plastic to build their temporary shelters as the police blocked vehicular traffic from the designated streets.<sup>4</sup> Already by the following morning it became clear to me that life in the center would turn rather unusual during this time. As I left my apartment at the corner of Cuba and Isabel la Católica, four blocks away from Madero Street, I noticed that the streets were oddly calm and quiet and that there was an absolute absence of cars. Although these streets remained open to vehicular traffic, the fact that their intersections with Madero street were blocked discouraged drivers from

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<sup>4</sup> The failure of Mexico City’s government, headed by AMLO’s party, to prevent protesters from blocking Madero and Reforma streets became one of the most contentious issues during the *plantón*. Indeed, critics claimed that the local administration was using taxpayer money to support the *plantón* by, for example, providing electricity or police support, which the interim mayor vehemently denied. The latter’s official line was that his administration was protecting the demonstrators’ constitutional right to free assembly as well as ensuring that the protests did not get violent. Critics argued that the sit-in was violating their constitutional right to freedom of movement. However, there were only few voices that demanded the use of police force to remove the protesters from the streets, which reflected the tense political climate and a generalized fear of a further radicalization of the protest movement.



using them. Pedestrians now had the streets all to themselves and did not have to battle their way through the crowded sidewalks, jostling street vendors, as they usually did. I remember thinking that morning that this was how a pedestrian historic center would look and feel.

As the days went by, the *campamentos* acquired a less improvised appearance. White metal and awning structures typically used in outdoor events at the Zócalo, such as book fairs and official ceremonies, covered the large expanse of the square as well as the entire ten blocks of Madero Street, from sidewalk to sidewalk, and small scattered areas on Juárez and Reforma avenues. Underneath them, the *campamentos* were for the most part equipped with electricity and well delimited sleeping and eating sections. The Zocalo was tightly packed with different *campamentos*, one for each of the 31 states of the country, connected by narrow passages.

On Madero the *campamentos* occupied only one side of the street, leaving the other side as well as both sidewalks free for pedestrians. There were several assembly areas along Madero, outfitted with chairs, couches, and television sets where political films—from documentaries about AMLO to films about the US invasion of Iraq—as well as art-house movies were constantly being shown and where information about the irregularities in the election was constantly being disseminated. There were multiple visual art installations and exhibits across the *campamentos*, as well as several stages on which musicians performed a wide variety of musical genres, from punk rock to folk, throughout the day. There were improvised “cultural centers” where artists and cultural promoters offered all sorts of activities, from story time for children to acting classes or handcraft workshops. A multiplicity of banners, posters, and signs hanging from ropes or

placed on tents, metal structures, tables, stages and stands proliferated as weeks passed. Alongside an assortment of vending stands and “cultural centers,” the emptier and more thinly scattered *campamentos* on Juárez and Reforma avenues boasted a modest fun fair, equipped with a carousel and a small Ferris wheel, as well as two small soccer fields.

In general the *plantón* exuded a festive atmosphere, which nevertheless was occasionally punctured by anger and frustration. It was populated by a sundry assortment of people, from organized popular groups affiliated to the PRD, which composed the majority of protesters, to middle-class professionals, artists, students, and intellectuals. During the day, and especially on weekends, the *campamentos* along Madero and Juárez were usually very crowded, with large concentrations of people making it almost impossible to walk through them. Hundreds strolled looking at the painting and poster exhibits, listening to concerts or stopping to buy from the countless street vendors scattered throughout the *plantón*. Other pedestrians who came to the center for work or consumption could be seen walking on Madero’s sidewalks nervously and indirectly glancing at the protesters.

The image of the historic center as a clean, safe and pleasant space to visit, work or live, which many new residents and small investors with whom I was in regular contact had worked hard to cultivate among friends, family, prospective new residents and potential investors, was reverting back to an image of disorder and violence. The message conveyed by the media, most of which was harshly critical of the *plantón*, was of a chaotic and sequestered historic center. News item after news item emphasized the millions of pesos that were being lost every day because of the *plantón* and the impossibility of accessing the historic center due to traffic disruptions. These

representations echoed racialized political discourses about *plantones* in general, which the media often depict as “invasions” of public space that go against basic rules of propriety and civility. But in keeping with the affectively charged tenor of the entire 2006 election season, the media (especially national TV, radio and some newspapers) portrayed this particular *plantón* as an assault on Mexico’s young democracy like no other before and as threatening the political stability of the country.

Such mass-mediated images of chaos and total disruption, of a historic center under siege, failed to capture how new residents experienced the *plantón* in their everyday lives. For the people we have met throughout these pages, whether Daniel, Camille, Monica or Bernardo, and especially for those living on or near Madero Street, the *plantón* was a tangible, physical presence to be reckoned with in their daily routines, regardless of their political positions. It was an event that disrupted the “normal” pace of life in the historic center and that had direct and concrete effects for them. People who worked outside the center, for example, complained about a significant worsening of their travel times. Luis lived at the corner of Madero and Bolívar streets and worked in Santa Fe, the city’s newest financial hub located in the western periphery. For him, going to work and returning home had become, in his own words, “a true nightmare,” as the *plantón* severely disrupted traffic near the historic center. But like many others he too appreciated the absence of cars and noise in the historic center and went on with his life as usual, attending meetings of the Resident’s Association, visiting friends in apartments nearby, or going out to drinks at the local cantinas.

At the same time, new residents lived the *plantón* as a mass-mediated event that played out in a contentious, polarized and affectively saturated national political arena.

As such, the *plantón* acquired a multiplicity of meanings for them, from offering a renewed experience of the historic center as a pedestrian space to raising serious doubts about the long-term viability of the rescue; from being a daily nuisance to destabilizing their own place in the historic center and the constant labor of “rescue” that they performed. Indeed, for many new residents the *plantón* appeared as a crucial turning point in the narrative of rescue, a return of the masses to the spaces of the historic center that destabilized their very aspiration to a cosmopolitan present while locating them in the here and now of Mexico City’s class and racial hierarchies. But in their return to the historic center, in showing that they had actually never left, the masses also returned to the heart of national politics, disrupting far more than the narrative of rescue. For they had shaken as well the mainstream narrative of “democratization,” with its emphasis on catching up with the present, and revealed the tensions that traverse this narrative.

What does this affectively charged period reveal about social and political belonging in Mexico? How are we to understand the concerns and anxieties that the *plantón* triggered among new residents of the historic center? What kinds of fears did it incarnate for them? In what ways did their anxieties reference far broader concerns, and what in turn were those concerns about? What sorts of political forms and political memories haunted the *plantón* and the discourses about it? In this chapter I take up these questions, exploring how the specter of the popular masses that hovered over the historic center in the context of the rescue erupted onto center stage during the elections of 2006 and the post-election protests that followed.

In exploring the intersection of localized experiences of the *plantón* and its effects on the rescue on the one hand with national anxieties about democracy and the political

stability of the country on the other, I aim to expose the resonances between the small-scale localized interactions that have formed the focus of this dissertation and broader political configurations in contemporary Mexico. I hope to show in a clearer way how the sensibilities and aspirations of the historic center's new residents, what I have called their cosmopolitan aspirations, are inscribed within a larger reconfiguration of political sensibilities and forms of social and political belonging. More specifically I aim to explore how the figure of the urban masses (from the criminalized crowds of street "informals" to the ostensibly amorphous crowd of demonstrators) at once informs and disrupts these sensibilities and forms of belonging.

### **Farewell to the Masses?**

The 2006 election and the protests that followed, especially the *plantón*, at once revealed and deepened an important fissure in the narrative of "democratization" in Mexico. Both supporters and critics of the *plantón* claimed to act in defense of the country's young democracy, which they described as severely threatened by their opponents. AMLO claimed that "the right" was preventing the consolidation of democracy and had gone as far as committing fraud—a routine practice during the era of one-party rule—in order to protect its entrenched "interests." His critics asserted that he himself was an authoritarian figure who undermined the country's "democratic institutions" and represented all the evils of "populism." To be sure, such cacophony expressed the constitutive ambiguities of the modern concept of democracy, which articulates, often uneasily, two different traditions: the "liberal tradition" with its emphasis on the rule of law and the respect of individual liberty and the "democratic

tradition,” which stresses equality and popular sovereignty (Mouffe 2000; Rancière 2006). But the cacophony also expressed a fundamental tension and, most importantly, a destabilizing proximity between ostensibly conflicting forms of social and political belonging.

Like elsewhere in Latin America, in the 1980s and 1990s a wide range of actors from different political orientations converged around the struggle for democratization in Mexico. In this particular case the common enemy was the authoritarian one-party regime. While liberal ideologues and activists pushed for creating the institutional conditions that would enable a peaceful transition, the left saw a multiplicity of emergent social movements as vehicles for bringing about a more inclusive form of government and a more egalitarian society (Dagnino 1998). In other words, different political horizons and aspirations came together under the banners of “civil society” and “democracy” during this period (Gutmann 2002). But, as I argued in Chapter 4, a particular meaning of these terms has become dominant within the mainstream narrative of democratization: civil society has come to stand as the alternative to *el pueblo*, which today smacks of lower class crudeness, lack of political maturity and, ultimately, a threat to democracy. The latter, in contrast, refers to strong institutions, individual liberty and last but not least, the rule of law.

As I argued in Chapter 5, this obsession with the rule of law, and especially the fixation with “informal” street workers and their disorderly and illegal practices, has displaced any serious reflection on the economic, social and political context for the explosion of street informality in the past two decades. Put differently, the focus on illegality has abstracted these practices from a context of increased labor precariousness

and social insecurity, marking them instead as the cause of the city's problems. Such discourses about informality-as-illegality-as-criminality (to refer again to Chapter 5) must be placed within the context of a new criminalization of poverty in different regions of the world (Wacquant 2002). But what interests me in this chapter is to explore the connections between the types of anxieties about the urban masses that I have discussed throughout this dissertation and certain concerns about mass-based political mobilizations, particularly as they were articulated during the *plantón*. In other words, I explore how in this affectively charged moment the armies of "informals" routinely denounced for sequestering the city's public space in the context of rescue (as I have discussed throughout the dissertation), and the masses of demonstrators who camped on the center's streets during the *plantón* were construed and perceived as identical: a residual and threatening force, never a constitutive element of the (neo) liberal present.

In "The Myth of the Multitude, or, Who's Afraid of the Crowd" William Mazzarella argues that in contemporary academic and political parlance (in both "conservative" and "progressive" milieus) the crowd appears outmoded, even rank. "Crowds," writes Mazzarella, "supposedly belong to the past of the (neo) liberal democracies of the global North. By the same token, they also mark the present of non—or insufficiently—liberal polities in the global South" (2010: 697). According to this depiction, crowds were the paradigmatic formation of an earlier phase of modernity, characterized by (now extinguished) mass utopias and top-down monumentalism (Buck-Morss 2000). Indeed, in the context of renewed celebrations of the autonomous self—free and responsible for his own destiny and his own self-fulfillment—and of decentralized and community-based forms of governance, it is no surprise that the crowd

is pushed to the past (Rose 1999).<sup>5</sup> It seems to evoke today the potentials of mass democratization and collective forms of social solidarity as well as the horrors of twentieth century totalitarianism (in both its fascist and communist modes).

Anachronistic and regressive in the present, the crowd ostensibly has currency only when it bursts onto the streets in a self-consciously quotational manner, that is to say, as an aestheticized evocation of older political formations (Schnapp and Tiews 2006, quoted by Mazzarella, p. 6).

As I have discussed throughout the dissertation, the figure of the crowd has had a similar fate in Mexico. From the perspective of Mexico's mainstream political discourse, it appears to smell of populism, nationalism and outmoded forms of social and political belonging, such as corporatism and clientelism. Here the specter to be grappled with is inextricably linked to the country's twentieth century revolution and the political regime that stemmed from it, a history that was firmly inscribed within twentieth century mass politics worldwide. The masses were an ambivalent element and legacy of the revolution. They were at once menacing (backward, uncouth and always potentially violent) and successfully incorporated into (and co-opted by) an authoritarian post-revolutionary regime. The masses were the future citizens of the country, to be educated and modernized by the state. In the contemporary moment, in contrast, the masses appear residual in two ways: first, as those who have been left out of a changing economic landscape; and secondly, within the neoliberal regime, as those who have been excluded

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<sup>5</sup> In *Powers of Freedom*, Nikolas Rose traces the transformation of a notion of freedom as solidarity, the very foundation of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century welfare state, into freedom as autonomy, where collective forms of social and political belonging associated with "solidarity" get repositioned as obstacles for the self-realization and fulfillment of free and autonomous individuals. Rose, N. S. (1999). Powers of freedom: reframing political thought. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY, Cambridge University Press.



as political subjects. In this narrative it is not the mass, who represent an atavism from the past and a relic of PRI-style politics, but the upstanding individual, who can claim the position of national subject (Yeh 2009).<sup>6</sup>

In the context of the 2006 presidential election and the post-election protests the ostensibly old-style forms of political belonging were regularly denounced under the term *populista*. In newspaper editorials and dinner table conversations alike the term was often deployed as an insult, which echoed a larger trend in Latin America, where “populist,” a term with long history in the region, has become synonymous with a wide variety of left leaning leaders.<sup>7</sup> Echoing a number of scholars of populism, Ernesto Laclau (2005) notes that this term is characterized by linguistic dispersion and by subsuming the most disparate movements under its mantle. Moreover, Laclau continues, the term “populism” always refers to its object in negative terms: populist movements (from both the “left” and the “right”) lack coherence, are intellectually poor, driven by affect rather than “rational” arguments (the leader’s charisma), and, worst of all, drastically simplify the political terrain into antagonistic dichotomies (the most classic being “the people” versus the “oligarchy” or “the elites”).

According to Laclau, who proposes a different theorization of populism, such dismissal is inscribed in what he calls the denigration of the masses in political discourse: “the discursive construction of a certain normality, of an ascetic political universe from

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion about the changing uses of “civil society” in Mexico’s recent history see: Escalante Gonzalbo, F. (2006). México, fin de siglo. *Pensar en México*. México, DF, Fondo de Cultura Económica: 19-36.

<sup>7</sup> For a historical discussion of the uses of the term in Latin America and Mexico see: Knight, A. (1998). “Populism and Neo-populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico.” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30(2): 223-248.

which its dangerous logics have to be excluded” (p. 19). Such denigration of the masses is in turn linked to another prejudice: “the repudiation of the undifferentiated milieu which is the ‘crowd’ or the ‘people’ in the name of social structuration and institutionalization” (p. 63). Indeed, as I discussed in the Introduction, the crowd is a constitutive motif of urban modernity that is likewise highly ambivalent. It refers on the one hand to the physical presence of the urban and evokes the dangers that threaten to intrude upon the social order: violence, criminality, and the specter of insurrection. But the term also refers to political collectivities, to the actors who erupted into history with the French revolution. As such, it is linked to the emergence of the people as the democratic sovereign (Jonsson 2006: 49). This very ambivalence of the masses is thus inextricably linked to the constitutive ambiguity of the people: at once the foundation of the democratic order and a constant threat to this very order.

In Laclau’s own approach to populism, the division of the political terrain into two antagonistic camps, is in fact constitutive to all forms of politics. In this sense, “populism” destabilizes the terrain of respectable politics, challenging the very divide between “normal” and pathological forms of political belonging and revealing that politics is always traversed by affective commitments. In the case of the *plantón*, as we will see below, a “populist” formation destabilized the narrative of rescue and the assumptions upon which it rests, as it also destabilized the hegemonic narrative in which the rescue is inscribed. The *plantón* was thus a sort of return of the repressed, not only of forms of political and social belonging supposedly surmounted, but also of the specter of class inequality and violence in post-post revolutionary Mexico.

### **Hanging from the Lampposts**

Let us begin the discussion with Mario, a forty-six year old doctor working as an independent consultant for an international pharmaceutical company. He had settled in the historic center less than a year before the *plantón*, after moving from Boston, where he spent more than a decade, to his native Mexico City to be near his aging father. A few weeks into the *plantón* I met Mario for drinks at the roof terrace bar in front of the Zocalo. As we watched the square covered by the white tents of the *campamentos* the conversation inevitably turned to the *plantón*. He told me that he had reluctantly voted for AMLO, which he described as “the lesser of two evils,” but insisted that he did not endorse this type of political protest. It was not that the *plantón* had any serious impact on his everyday life, as he only left the center once or twice a week, mostly to visit his father, and he did so by subway. He did not mind the *campamentos* and in fact he praised the tranquility that the *plantón* had brought to the center’s streets. What worried him, and to such an extent that he decided to move out of the historic center and settle in the southern residential neighborhood of Coyoacán, was what would happen after the *plantón*. He feared that things could get out of control, that protests could continue for months and that they would turn violent. He added jokingly: “when the revolution comes people like you and me who live in the historic center will be the first to be hanged from the lampposts.” We both laughed.

Mario’s educated yet sarcastic reference to the dangerous mob of the French Revolution that afternoon, in front of a Zócalo packed with protesters and their *campamentos*, conveyed the ambivalence of the mass that I discussed above: the democratic sovereign that can slip into violence and become a threat to the democratic

order. At the same time his joke expressed a concern about misrecognition that in turn resonated with the trope of standing out that I discussed in Chapter 2. “We”, who stand out in the historic center, will be hanged from the lampposts. “They” will mistake us and “we” will have to pay the consequences. But in cynically positioning both of us in the receiving end of revolutionary violence he also expressed a certain (liberal) guilt for his own advantageous position within Mexico’s class and racial hierarchies and, thus, an anxiety over proper recognition: “we” are the beneficiaries of “rescue” and they resent us.

At around nine in the evening, Mario and I walked on Madero Street towards his home in Luis’s building at the corner of Bolivar. We were attending an art exhibit opening in an empty commercial space on the ground floor of that building, which, as I mentioned in Chapter 4, was occasionally used as an improvised gallery. The daytime hustle and bustle of the *campamentos* on Madero Street, the handcraft workshops, the music and the movies, was giving way to nighttime tranquility. While some people, mostly women, prepared dinner at the improvised kitchens, others watched nighttime soap operas on television, lying down on the couches of their “living rooms.” These scenes of domesticity were suddenly interrupted by a group of young musicians who were singing traditional *songs* from the southern state of Veracruz as they walked down the street, followed by an entourage of approximately forty people. As we walked passed them they had just finished with a song and began to chant political slogans:

“Vote by vote, polling both by polling both.”

“Vote by vote, polling both by polling both.”

“If there’s no solution, there will be a revolution.”

“If there’s no solution, there will be a revolution.”

“You see,” whispered Mario with a mocking grin, as if proud that his earlier comment had been proven accurate, “better not be around here when that happens.” With a grin and a whisper Mario marked a slippage from a group of musicians playing traditional folk *songs* (the good *pueblo*) to what he jokingly interpreted as revolutionary fever (the bad *pueblo*). It was indeed in the form of a joke that Mario expressed an anxiety not only about the general exacerbation of class-based politics but, more immediately, about his own position in Mexico’s class and racial hierarchies and in the historic center, which revealed itself as a space of popular politics and protest.

As we arrived at the improvised gallery in Mario’s building I noticed that someone had written PRIVATE EVENT with blue ink at the bottom of the exhibition’s poster, which was hanging by the two-meter wide open entrance door on Bolivar Street, just a few meters away from the *campamentos*. To the other side of the entrance a big sign also read PRIVATE EVENT in black, capital letters. About ten people were smoking and chatting by the gallery’s entrance. Others stood on the street, taking advantage of the absence of cars. Inside, the space was packed, filled with the murmur of small chatter. The exhibition displayed the final projects of an art class in Luis’ brother high school, an exclusive and prestigious private school located in the nearby neighborhood Polanco. Therefore, besides the usual crowd who attended these events, such as new residents or regular visitors to the historic center, this time the guests included the young art students and their families. Many of them, Luis explained to me, seldom if ever visited the historic center and were reluctant to attend the opening because of the *plantón*, although in the end a lot of them had shown up.

I had attended many events at the improvised gallery before and as far as I was aware this was the first time that an opening there was marked as “private.” It seemed clear that the organizers had placed the signs, probably at the last minute, because of the proximity of the *plantón* and in order to ease the concerns of those guests unfamiliar with the historic center. After all, there was a massive *campamento* on Madero Street, just a few meters away. But what would it mean that this was a private event? Certainly no one was asked for an invitation at the gallery’s entrance and I doubt that anyone who tried to enter the gallery would have been turned away. To me, just like Mario’s comment about hanging from the lamppost, the improvised signs reading PRIVATE EVENT stood as an emblem of how localized concerns triggered by the *plantón* about the viability of the rescue and the livability of the center were entangled with mass-mediated anxieties about the political stability of the country.

We must now consider the antagonistic and toxic environment as well as the acute social and political tensions that surrounded the runoff to the presidential election and that only intensified in its aftermath. To begin with, the campaigns, the most costly and mass mediated in the country’s history, were based on negative accusations and fear mongering (Aziz Nassif 2007: 27). Calderon, the PAN candidate used the slogan “Lopez Obrador, a danger for Mexico” in multiple campaign ads that suggested that AMLO would expropriate the houses of those who owned more than one home; or that he would partition people’s homes in order to house the poor; a Chavez in the making (a reference to Venezuela’s president), he would bring economic disaster to the country. President Fox magnified these negative messages through repeated public appearances in which he indirectly referred to AMLO as “the danger of populism” in clear disregard to existing

regulations, which forbid the president from intervening in electoral campaigns.<sup>8</sup> Also against existing regulations, a group of businessmen partook in the negative campaign by running political ads against AMLO. In turn AMLO, whose campaign slogan was “For the well being of all, the poor first,” responded with a hardened class-based discourse. He constantly spoke against the “privileged” of the country—its corrupt and power hungry elites—or the “far-right” defending their interests against the “humble people” (i.e. the poor) of Mexico. Later on, when the Tribunal dismissed AMLO’s claim of fraud and declared Calderón as president elect, the former went on to declare: “To hell with (democratic) institutions.”

There seemed to be no shades of grey, no middle ground and hence no possibility of “dialogue.” As anthropologist and communications scholar Rosanna Reguillo has argued in a nuanced analysis of the 2006 elections, there were two sentiments activated by these negative campaigns: fear and hatred. Such mass mediated images, she contends, found resonance in “the fragmented terrain of a country with profound social inequalities” (Reguillo 2008: 147). In such a contentious political climate the two different political sensibilities that were activated and mobilized around the 2006 elections appeared to represent radically different and incompatible paths for the country. The presidential election became a highly charged topic around dinner tables or at parties, barbershops, and corner stores. The people with whom I was in regular contact in the historic center constantly discussed and assessed the negative slogan of “Lopez Obrador: A danger for Mexico”, or whether he would bring the country to economic ruin.

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<sup>8</sup> The election saga in fact began already the previous year, in 2005, as President Fox led a campaign to strip AMLO of his immunity as mayor of Mexico City based on a tenuous claim, which was ultimately dismissed. This event propelled AMLO to national fame.

The Internet became an arena for the expression of these anxieties. Numerous email chains, electronic forums and blogs denounced the “*nacos*” or the “resentful” crowds who were camping in the historic center and Reforma. Such charges were countered with denunciations against the “rich” or the “*güeros*” or the “privileged” who supported the PAN and its candidate. Those who criticized AMLO were equated with the “far-right” while those who supported the *plantón* were described as anachronistic caricatures of an outmoded left. Class became explicitly mobilized as the dividing line of society: the gullible and dangerous “poor” versus the machinating and evil “rich.” From heated blogs displaying overtly racial terminology to editorial pieces expressing preoccupation with democracy in the country, during the *plantón* racially inflected discourses of “decency” versus “ignorance”, “*nacos*” versus “*gueros*”, “the past” versus “the future”, and “citizens” versus “clients” inundated the public sphere.

The “PRIVATE EVENT” signs, then, gestured to the *plantón* (and to this contentious political climate) and marked the art opening as separate from it, making a subtle distinction between two different collectivities in the historic center: on the one hand, the public of an art event, and on the other, the protesting masses. To be sure, Bolivar and Madero streets were far busier and more crowded during other events that had taken place at “normal” times, when the center’s sidewalks commonly bustled with people. Everyone walking down the street could have potentially entered these events and yet, as I said before, their organizers had never marked them as “private”. It seemed that the proximity of the *plantón* destabilized the signs and status markers that make certain spaces—like an art gallery—public yet inaccessible for many (Bourdieu 1984).

In this context, what otherwise would have remained a nominally “public” and



open event was marked as “private”. In other words, a certain illusion about the public and of public space in the historic center became undone in this affectively charged context. But the sign also disclosed new residents’ fears of a particular incarnation of the crowd, a subtle apprehension about the defiant masses of protesters bursting into the improvised gallery. In previous chapters I have discussed the presence of certain incarnations of the crowd in the historic center, of the “dangerous classes” of old, which in the discourses and practices of rescue oscillate between subjects to be enlightened and hopelessly irredeemable others. A massive *campamento* just outside one’s home, the *plantón* entailed a different and more menacing incarnation of the crowd, namely, the rebellious and potentially dangerous masses which threatened to derail not only the entire rescue project but the very democratization of the country.

### **The *Plantón* and the Temporality of Rescue**

In the year before the 2006 presidential elections mass protests in the historic center were almost a daily occurrence. On any given day there would be a group camping at the Zócalo or another nearby plaza and posing demands to the federal or local governments. But this time the protests, carrying on for weeks on end, were at the center of the most contentious national drama in decades. And this unrelenting, imposing presence of the organized masses during the *plantón* challenged, in a far more dramatic fashion than the lingering presence of street vendors in renovated streets or the occasional assault on Regina Street, the very temporality of rescue.

It challenged, that is, the expectation that “rescue” would eventually be a finished process and that events such as a small art opening in the most mixed and densely

populated of the city's urban spaces could go unmarked as private. Let us recall that for new residents and small investors with whom I conducted research “rescue” entailed a constant and continuous process of recuperating uninhabitable, disorderly or dangerous spaces. The rescue promised a certain future horizon in which one could inhabit the historic center as a cosmopolitan urban space. The very reasons that attracted new residents to live in the historic center, such as the allure of the urban experience, were inextricably linked to their expectation that the center would be transformed into a safe and inhabitable space through public and private investments.

For example, those living in renovated buildings in the cultural corridor narrated a gradual process of improvement. They talked about a “first generation” of new residents, those people who moved to Slim's residential buildings when conditions were “still very rough” (in 2002 and 2003) and who had eventually left the area. This was before the opening of Culture Space, or the renovation of the *callejón* and the new street lighting that came with it, or the introduction of a special police operation to patrol the streets and to safeguard Slim's properties. New residents of the financial corridor shared similar expectations about a continuous process of transforming the historic center into a safe and livable space, one in which certain practices, like walking down the sidewalk without having to worry about street vendors or organizing a public art exhibit in an improvised gallery, would be possible.

Let us recall that the discourse of rescue posited the historic center as an urban space at once empty and taken over. Rescue entailed a double move of “filling” the space (with renovated apartments and new consumption spaces; with new residents, local visitors and tourists; with art and cultural activities) while recovering it from criminality,

disorder and atavistic forms of dwelling. Unfit to inhabit a cosmopolitan urban space, the disorderly masses that in local parlance had “kidnapped” the center’s streets (from street vendors to *franeleros* to political protesters) would be substituted by another, more fitting, figure of the urban crowd: passers-by, “formal” consumers, the publics of cultural events (both small-scale and massive), a growing community of new residents, all of which would signal the vibrancy and livability of a rescued historic center. At the same time, the very temporality of rescue was inseparable from the temporality of the cosmopolitan: it was against the imagination of a cosmopolitan modernity that certain practices and forms of inhabiting public space were construed as outmoded and thus as having to be removed from the historic center, street vending being surely the most paradigmatic example.

To be sure, the idea of an incessant recuperation of spaces was constantly destabilized in daily encounters and interactions such as the ones I have discussed throughout this dissertation. For example, in the story about an encounter between street vendors and new residents that I discussed in Chapter 4, Armando paraphrased his neighbor addressing a street vendor in front of her house: “You know that you cannot be here”. As I suggested in my reading of that narrative, this address appealed to a presumed common knowledge of law (which forbids such activities), and to the promise of rescue to remove street vendors from the historic center. At the same time, I argued, the address expressed doubt about the very possibility of this promise, expressing something like: “You know that you cannot be here, and yet you *remain* here.” Indeed, street vendors, *franeleros* and other members of the center’s informal economy, as well as certain modes of inhabiting public space that the discourse and practices of rescue portrayed as linked

to such figures (for example throwing trash or loitering, as expressed in Pedro's URGENT NOTICE), continued to linger in the rescued spaces. Their continued presence foregrounded not only the incompleteness of the project but also the ever-present possibility of its failure.

And yet it was precisely in these interactions, disruptions and negotiations that new residents performed the work of rescue in their everyday lives, that is, the work of continuously recuperating the spaces of the historic center. A series of state bureaucrats, the police and, most importantly, the figure of Carlos Slim, crucially mediated this quotidian work of rescue. There were a series of unofficial arrangements that made such daily negotiations meaningful and enabled them to provide a sense that the rescue was moving forward, as in the case of new residents' relation to the police. In undermining these arrangements, the *plantón* brought the very possibility of negotiating the complicated realities of the historic center to a dramatic halt.

Far weightier issues and more powerful stakeholders had come to dominate the fate of the historic center. AMLO, the very man who as mayor of Mexico City had launched the rescue, making it one of the flagship projects of his administration, was undoing his own achievements, holding a *plantón* in the heart of the center. The police, for their part, were busy policing the *plantón*, and they seemed to have forgotten about the concerns of new residents, such as removing street vendors from the renovated streets or expanding security measures. Some complained that no one answered the phone when they called the command center to report street vendors or petty thefts. Others complained, based on rumors that they had heard, that the police were allowing street vendors to return to the streets of the historic center in exchange for their support of the

protest movement. The point to be made here is that in disrupting a series of already precarious arrangements (between new residents, Foundation executives, the police, and state bureaucrats), the *plantón* became an uncanny reminder of the extent to which the very labor of rescue itself had always been embedded in those same forms of sociability from which it allegedly sought to redeem the historic center.

Beyond the fact that the police didn't pick up the phone for a while, it was perhaps this reminder—the way that the absence of these arrangements betrayed something about their nature that was ordinarily disavowed—that really stood at the center of the deep concerns expressed by residents and entrepreneurs about the prospects of the rescue in general. Many felt that they had been deceived into thinking that a different historic center could be possible. It was above all the increasing doubt about Slim's commitment to the rescue that appeared most worrisome against the background of the *plantón* and of the evidently widening rift between Slim and AMLO.

In sharp contrast to his high profile campaign to promote the Chapultepec Agreement around the country in the runoff to the presidential election (see Chapter 4), Slim maintained a low profile during the *plantón*. He refrained from making public comments about the election and its aftermath. Slim's silence was, in a way, loud. It had a great impact and led to all sorts of speculations. In endless conversations about the *plantón* with new residents, with friends and family in Mexico City, or with taxi drivers, I repeatedly heard rumors, which also circulated in the press, that Slim was financing the *plantón* or that he was secretly negotiating with Calderón and AMLO and promoting the idea of an interim government and new elections. In the historic center, these rumors were intertwined with the suspicion that he wanted to stop his involvement in the rescue

project. Only after the *plantón* had ended,<sup>9</sup> Slim finally made public declarations: The *plantón*, and AMLO's actions more broadly, were "a Mexican and Kafkaesque folly." Slim immediately became a target of AMLO's supporters, who picketed his restaurants and began calling him a "traitor."

In early November, just a month and a half after the end of the *plantón*, an exhibition opening took place at the patio of one of the Foundation buildings on Madero Street, an open space that continuously hosted public art shows. A few hours before it was set to start, Armando sent me a text message with the news: all new residents were invited; Slim himself would be there but we should be discreet, as his presence had not been publicly announced. That evening, as I was walking on Madero street towards the site of the exhibition, I distinguished a group of approximately fifty people concentrated at the fence that divided the patio from the sidewalk, with signs that I could not read. As I got nearer I could hear their chants: "Slim, you traitor, it is an honor to support AMLO."

I entered the patio to find all high executives of the Foundation looking extremely preoccupied. Its young director, a man with whom I had a rather amicable relationship, greeted me distractedly, as he was on the phone instructing someone that Slim (or *el ingeniero* as his aides and subordinates affectionately referred to him) should cancel his appearance. The conditions were not safe, he later explained to me, and there would be a

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<sup>9</sup> Already in mid August AMLO summoned a National Democratic Convention, that is, a massive assembly to take place at the Zócalo and that would decide on the future of the movement. This seemed to announce a new phase of the protests but it was not clear, however, that the *plantón* would continue. AMLO and his supporters voluntarily lifted the *plantón* starting on September 12, 2006, just in time for the military parade of September 16 to be held as usual. The first massive demonstration of AMLO's National Democratic Convention took place afterwards at the Zócalo, where AMLO was "elected" "legitimate president" of Mexico by the crowd. On November 20<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution, he was "sworn in" during another massive demonstration at the Zócalo. Although the protests movement continued during the following months, its force gradually dwindled.

lot of negative publicity if Slim showed up. The event went on without Slim and the protesters eventually dispersed. Later on, at a reception in a restaurant across the street, I ran into the director of Slim's real estate company in the historic center. He was furious. "I was going to meet him today", he told me, "I was going to meet God himself and these people ruined it for me!" He wondered who could have leaked the information that Slim was attending the event and confided to me his suspicion that it was someone from the Fideicomiso, the local government's office in charge of the rescue with which the Foundation worked very closely. What previously appeared as a collaborative relation had had become infested with suspicion and mistrust.

### **Back to the Past**

In the previous section I argued that the *plantón* became a dramatic reminder that the distinction between "old" and "cosmopolitan" forms of sociability in the historic center was rather porous. The rescue crucially depended on the mobilization of personal relations and on quotidian negotiations to move forward. And yet the rescue was informed by, and at the same time fostered, a cosmopolitan imaginary of civility, clear rules and regulations and committed individuals working for the common good: from clear parking rules to an efficient police; from good neighborly practices to clean streets; from public art exhibitions to engaged citizens reporting irregularities to the appropriate authorities.

Many artists working in culture space, for instance, were committed to fostering new forms of civility in the neighborhood where they now lived through art and cultural activities. The temporal imagination in which these commitments were inscribed,

according to which other forms of sociability were out of place (and thus relegated to the past) also pervaded negative representations of the *plantón* as a regressive political and social formation that smacked of populism. In this last section I would like to explore this temporal imagination further by looking at the resonances between the political commitments of new residents and larger anxieties about what a political commentator called “a return to the past” during the *plantón*.

After the presidential elections, the mood at Culture Space was generally grim, as many were AMLO supporters and were looking forward to a more generous budget for the arts under his administration. But the effects of the *plantón* were hardly felt on Regina Street and its surroundings. To be sure, there was less traffic, but life continued as normal, except for an intensification of talk about politics and a hardening of political positions. Consider for example Monica, the writer and academic whom we met in the Introduction. She had returned to her native Mexico City in early 2005 after four years in Valencia, Spain, where she earned a PhD in literature, and just when Bernardo, her old friend from college, was designing the cultural center and recruiting its staff. Monica joined Culture Space and rented an apartment near Regina Street, which she shared with a roommate.

Like Bernardo, Monica knew the southwestern section of the historic center rather well, as she had spent her college years as a student at a nearby liberal arts college and had participated in the center’s alternative art scene during the late 1990s. She had an ambivalent relation to the historic center, which she considered at once a very familiar and hostile environment and where, she said, she never felt entirely welcome. Unlike Bernardo, who was friendly with many of Regina’s old inhabitants, from the *tortilleros*



to the kids who attended Culture Space's workshops and their mothers, Monica had more ambivalent relations to "the neighbors."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, and as I mentioned in the Introduction, she had the reputation of being very daring and even a bit reckless. Recall how she went into a dreaded *vecindad* with Manuel, one of its inhabitants. In another story that captured this quality of hers well, and which I must have heard at least ten times from different people, she and her boyfriend were walking on Regina after a night out at Pedro's bar. As they got to the corner they were assaulted by a group of teenagers, who demanded their money, their cell phones and Monica's boyfriend's leather jacket. Scared to death, he immediately complied. But Monica recognized the robbers as teenagers who lived nearby, and began screaming at them loudly that they should not rob their own neighbors. The kids immediately returned the jacket, the cell phone and the wallet and went away.

One afternoon in mid August I was having a late lunch with Pedro and Sebastian (one of the visual artists who worked at Culture Space) at the former's bar. We were talking about an upcoming installation that Sebastian was curating in Culture Space as part of an ongoing project in which he invited a different artist to intervene upon his office every month. Monica arrived at the bar and sat to join us, tossing a copy of the Sunday edition of the newspaper *El Universal* on the table. Without saying as much as hello she interrupted our conversation: "This is my position. Perez Gay has nailed it." She was referring to an article by a journalist and fiction writer famous for his witty and ironic columns about the complexities (and absurdities) of life in Mexico City as he

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the term "community" as artists and cultural promoters deployed it in the historic center see Chapter 3.

himself navigates them in his daily routines.

Just a few days earlier, Monica, Sebastian and I had had a passionate discussion about the *plantón*. While Sebastian and I were ambivalent about it politically (although we both unequivocally enjoyed the absence of cars), Monica was adamant about her criticism of the protests and of AMLO himself, whom she described as a populist and an authoritarian figure. AMLO was for her the opposite of a modern left, which, she said, she would be more than happy to support. She had now brought us the newspaper article to prove her point. In the piece, titled “To the Zocalo, towards the past,” Perez Gay described the *plantón* as a trip back in time: “There are some who look for their future in the past. It seemed impossible, but we have done it.” And in his characteristically ironic style he cited the works of Marx and Engels being sold at some *campamentos*, the references to the Cuban Revolution, the “popular cinemas” scattered throughout the *plantón*, and the people playing chess as incontrovertible examples of an old and rank left that did not, and should not, belong in the present:

I crossed the threshold to enter the tunnel to the center of Mexico City. It is both a tunnel and a wall that divides the city along fifteen kilometers. “We apologize for the inconveniences [but] we are building democracy,” reads a sign in a *campamento*. Very strange materials for building this democracy, metal and awning structures paid by Mexico City’s government, supported by the indomitable force of faith and of PRI clientelism, now absorbed by the PRD, the dogmas of an antediluvian left and the figure of a leader (Perez Gay 2006).

What Perez Gay failed to notice was how the references to the Latin American political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the ones that he encountered in the *plantón*, were entangled with very contemporary forms of political mobilization, from the extensive use of communication technology—such as internet blogs and text messages—to the deployment of video-art installations or the staging of satirical

performances. Indeed, this is how I would read AMLO's gesture during the demonstration on July 1<sup>st</sup> with which I opened this chapter, when he asked the crowd to raise their hand and vote after "proposing" the *plantón*. While reminiscent of the political performance of the assembly, his act also activated a sentiment of individual citizenship. The collectivity that it invoked was not one of a crowd blindly following its leader but rather of a collection of individuals being consulted by their elected representatives and making an informed and reasoned decision; a referendum of sorts. No doubt, the supposedly outmoded and the new often coexist in complex arrangements. But the point I want to make in quoting Perez Gay's observations, inscribed as they were in a climate of anxious denunciations of the *plantón* as the return of a presumably surmounted populist politics, is the extent to which they resonated with the sentiments of many people I knew in the historic center.

They echoed Monica's own political sensibilities. In several of Culture Space's staff meetings that I attended as well as in multiple informal discussions about the cultural center held over beers at the bar, she insistently argued against offering free workshops for local children. Her rationale resonated with the arguments presented by Perez Gay. Monica claimed that such gestures were reminiscent of a paternalistic state and were incongruent with the values that Culture Space aimed to inculcate in the community, such as civility and respect for the built environment. Only by paying for them, and even if but a nominal fee, would the community truly appreciate the workshops.

In a similar fashion, for Monica and other new residents the *plantón* went against the values that the rescue project ostensibly rested upon and fostered: efficiency, legality,

transparency and civility in the historic center. Entangled with new residents' concerns about the livability of the center or the sustainability of the rescue, there was a sense that this form of protest belonged to a different time. To be sure, such ubiquitous tropes of pastness expressed the past as a looming threat. But the point I wish to make to conclude this chapter is that they expressed an anxiety over waking up to find oneself at home in "the past" that one had ostensibly surmounted. Or, perhaps even more menacingly, they expressed an anxiety of encountering that such distinctions between a "past" and a "future"—just like Armando's distinction between the "citizen" and the "client" that I discussed in Chapter 4—would ultimately turn out to be illegible.

## Conclusion

When I arrived in the field in January 2006, my aim was to investigate the routines through which newly settled residents in the historic center came to inhabit this place as their home, producing and experiencing boundaries between safety and danger in their everyday lives. How, I wanted to inquire, do people threatened by the violence of crime simultaneously constitute the threat of violence to others in the daily, constant securing of their worlds? In the case of Mexico City's historic center this happened, I thought, through the transformation of the built environment, the introduction of new police and surveillance apparatuses and the appearance of new modes of street-level interactions. Drawing on anthropological and philosophical writings on home and dwelling I conceptualized "home" as a place that, while promising security and protection, remains always permeable, a necessarily fragile space that must be constantly re-secured in the face of real and imaginary dangers. The police, I thought, were a crucial element for the making of home and at the very same time a constant reminder of its fragility.

As it happened, my fieldwork took place in the affectively charged period that I described in Chapter 6: the heated run-up that led to the 2006 presidential elections and the antagonistic aftermath that followed them. These events, and the kinds of sentiments that were activated around them, exercised a particular impact on the rescue of the historic center and, consequently, on the direction of my research. To begin with, the intensification of racialized class tensions that suffused these events left an evident mark upon the forms of sociability that I was studying just as much as upon my own ways of looking at them. It also pervaded new residents' disillusionment with the police, the local

administration and the Historic Center Foundation. But this localized disenchantment with the promise of rescue to bring about a cosmopolitan present was entangled with a larger sense of disillusionment among my informants, namely, the vanishing confidence in the possibility of catching up with an imagined spatial and temporal elsewhere.

As it turned out, what I had come across formed part of a broad and longstanding obsession with “catching up” or with being up to the standards of an imagined foreign gaze. I found this obsession in my informants’ narratives of the most banal interactions (like going to the corner store), as well as in television talk shows or newspaper articles. It emerged in concerns about trash in the historic center or about “citizenship” in Mexico. The rescue teemed with images of futurity and, consequently, with images of pastness: from a local magazine referring to the initiative as “building a historic center for the twenty first century” or the continuous circulation of images of New York to certain imaginaries of legality and of what a modern police ought to look like. Along these images of futurity other modes of inhabiting public space or of practicing citizenship were construed as belonging to the past. These temporal imaginaries, moreover, were suffused with class and racialized inflections.

Without renouncing my previous interest in the ways in which newly settled residents inhabited the historic center as their home, then, I was drawn to explore these obsessions with “catching up” and especially as they gained renewed salience around the events of 2006. Given the confrontational context, I was led to focus on the instability of social relations in such a heated and affectively charged atmosphere. What happens when different social groups come together in this setting as neighbors? As clients? As citizens? How do they relate to each other? When does communication between them

fail? In other words, I have tried to remain attentive to the obsessive preoccupation over catching up with an imagined temporal and spatial elsewhere—what I have called a cosmopolitan present—while attending to how this obsession is intertwined with the “here and now” of social interaction in Mexico City’s historic center.

Throughout the dissertation I have explored the intersection of this temporal imaginary with the production and experience of class (and racialized) distinctions in contemporary Mexico City. I have undertaken this exploration from two cardinal directions. First, proceeding from the perspective of urban anthropology, and approaching the city as a place of manifold rhythms and multilayered interactions, I have proposed the “urban encounter” as a crucial site for the production and experience of class distinctions. In this regard, my dissertation differs from other ethnographic approaches to the spatialization of “fear” in contemporary megalopolises (Caldeira 2000). Ethnographic studies of cities have tended to focus on the proliferation of gated communities, fences, barriers and other forms of “physical,” spatial divisions in the face of insecurity.

My own focus, in contrast, has been on the “return to the city.” I have studied a group of people who yearn for the density, heterogeneity and risks of the metropolis, exploring how a diffuse sense of menace and danger has informed their aspirations and their modes of dwelling. I have thus traced the emergence of boundaries that are always shifting and unstable. And I have located these boundaries not in the physical construction of fences, but in everyday modes of interaction and in the often-intimate relations between social groups. “Urban encounters,” I have argued, entail an attempt to socially and spatially locate the other and are always traversed by the possibility of

mis/recognition. One result of this approach has been that, in my analysis, policing and “security” have thus appeared as more unstable and ambivalent than what a focus on “physical” boundaries would have suggested.

With its focus on the aspirations and desires of the protagonists of rescue, and with its emphasis on the ambivalence of their subject positions, the dissertation has offered a novel approach for studying the re-colonization of urban spaces by the middle and upper classes and thus for examining contemporary urban experiences. In the very particular context of Mexico City, I have traced connections between, on the one hand, the ambivalent position of the artist/bohemian subject in these processes and, on the other hand, the specific conundrums of my informants. I hope that I have captured how their aspirations to a cosmopolitan class position are constantly punctured by their own embeddedness in the violence of class and racialized distinctions in contemporary Mexico City.

In a second direction, the dissertation has been in conversation with current debates on urban “public space.” It has problematized a perspective that, in my opinion, has been insufficiently critical in its celebration of the potentials of “public space” for the exercise of citizenship and democracy (See for example: Holston and Appadurai 1996).

Citizenship is, of course, a term laden with a variety of culturally inflected meanings. In this dissertation I have explored a particular image of citizenship that appears as deeply entangled with obsessions over “catching up”. I have discussed how the citizen emerges as an impossible ideal that contrasts with another figure, namely, the “client,” who is now cast as residual. This racialized figure, I have argued, refers to an increasingly (or once again) criminalized segment of the urban masses. In this sense, the process I have



studied is embedded in a larger shift across the world, which spells the receding horizon of social welfare and the ascendance of residual or surplus populations. Put differently, citizenship has emerged throughout this dissertation as a class-inflected social position. A central argument of the dissertation, then, has been that, while crucial for the cosmopolitan aspirations of my informants, the distinction between the citizen and the client becomes ultimately illegible. The ambivalence of their subject positions reveals itself in the ways in which they find themselves at home in those same forms of social and political belonging that they disavow.

An important point of the dissertation has been to trace a certain racialized dimension of quotidian interactions in Mexico City. I have argued that class distinctions are traversed by racial imaginaries, and more specifically by what I have called the racial imaginary of the Indian. In revisiting the history of *mestizaje* I have moved away from the usual focus on the status of indigenous populations and into a discussion about social relations between “*mestizo*” subjects in urban space. Studies of “racism” in Mexico all too often seem to take the Indian/*mestizo* dichotomy for granted, as if a “*mestizo*” majority and an “indigenous” minority entirely heterogeneous to it exist in the country. As I have tried to demonstrate, the “Indian” in fact turns out to be a much more elusive category that permeates everyday life and racialized images of the Mexican in the most disparate registers, from an encounter in a pedestrian square in the historic center to an editorial about the problem of “informals.” The “figure of the Indian”, I have argued, is not anchored in particular sociological groups but has become an attribute, a menace, a character trait cast in a temporal register of pastness. In this regard, one can never be

certain whether one is an “Indian” and, consequently, neither can one be certain about one’s status as a modern subject.

The dissertation has thus explored a tension between a project “for the enjoyment of all” (as it was expressed in Pedro’s NOTICE), and the foreclosure of its possibility. Situating the rescue and the aspirations, fears and affective commitments of my informants in a particular historical moment across the world, the dissertation has developed an innovative understanding of the changing dynamics of social and political belonging in neoliberal Mexico. I have argued that the contemporary fetishization of liberal citizenship has engendered new forms of political and social exclusion. More specifically, I have focused on how the masses appear in this political configuration as subjects to be redeemed and at once as ineluctably non-assimilable others, unfit for the requirements of a cosmopolitan present.

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